A RETHINKING
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Dossier

**Pandemic and
the Crisis of
Capitalism**

Regimes of Labor under Pandemic

The "key worker" has occupied a central place in Britain's popular discourse during the pandemic. The celebration of those workers who have continued to work in Britain throughout the pandemic—emergency services workers, shop workers, couriers, and cleaners, among many others—has provided a point of unity for the nation as it endures the present crisis. The image of this particular worker has repeatedly couched the government's public-health advice, with the obligations to engage in social distancing, to self-isolate when ill, and to only travel when necessary often stressed in relation to protecting the country's key workers and the work that they do. Advertising campaigns have used this image as a cornerstone of their marketing campaigns, thanking key workers for their service and often donating money to funds to help them in various ways. It has also been adopted by individuals, with most engaging in a weekly round of applause for the country's key workers, literally stepping into their streets and celebrating them.

It would, however, be mistaken to observe this celebration of key workers in Britain as a benign

The Ideology of Work and the Pandemic in Britain

Samuel J. R. Mercer

expression of social solidarity in the face of the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. On the contrary, the encouraged celebration of Britain's key workers and its performance within the key ideological apparatuses of the state throughout the pandemic serves to mystify the specific social conditions that have made the positions of these workers so perilous in the first place, and which nonetheless compel their continued work. In order to survive the present crisis, capitalist social relations—and the strategies of accumulation attached to them—have necessarily been protected and reproduced: a reality that has seen the safeguarding of workers fall secondary to the safeguarding of capital. The fetishism of the key worker and the universal celebration of this image of selfless dedication to work in the face of the pandemic has been an integral mechanism in the deployment of an "ideology of work" in Britain (Althusser 2014), the primary aim of which has been to obscure the ongoing reproduction of capitalist social relations at the cost of the safety of workers in Britain, particularly those celebrated as "key" by this ideological deployment.

Readers of *Rethinking Marxism* will likely be familiar with the arguments presented by Louis Althusser (2014) in his text *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*. However, one of the less analyzed

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aspects of this text is Althusser's considerations of the "ideology of work" (43), and how the specific ideological schemas that emerge at the point of production fit more broadly with his analysis of the state (Mercer 2018). In his analysis of the labor process and the division of labor in society, Althusser (2014) argued that particular ideologies emerge at this level with the specific function of concealing or obfuscating the class antagonisms and inequalities that underpin the reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. One particularly important ideological method by which the division of labor is justified—both within the labor process and within society more generally—is through an appeal to the capacities of the individual worker to surpass and transcend these divisions. Althusser argued that ideologies are deployed to "'humanize' relations in the enterprise between supervisors, engineers and managers on the one hand and workers on the other" (35), disguising material and structural class divisions as merely "technical" differences that can be overcome by any individual, providing they have the correct character. As Althusser wrote, "As for the worker who becomes an engineer or even a manager, he is, in our society, a museum piece exhibited to encourage belief in the 'possibility' of the impossible and the idea that there are no social classes or that someone born a worker can 'rise above his class'" (37). In Althusser's formulation, the idolization and celebration of workers was not to be viewed in a vacuum but rather as an ideological symptom of the reproduction of capitalist social relations at the point of production itself. In other words, the very process that allows for relations of production and strategies of accumulation to be main-

tained and reproduced is productive of very particular ideologies, including (in particular) a humanist celebration of individual workers as a way of disguising the structural context that determines the position and treatment of these individuals in the first place.

Thus, the appeal to the heroic characteristics of the key worker in Britain has the function of eliding the class antagonisms that underwrite this worker's position and mobilization during the pandemic. The development and deployment of the key worker as an image has emerged from a very specific division of labor set in place before and during the pandemic and has maintained this worker's position in relation to that division of labor by justifying and obfuscating the class inequalities inherent within this division (inequalities that have been agitated and brought to the surface by the pandemic itself). In observing the deployment of the image of the key worker within this ideology of work, three important observations can be made about its function during the pandemic in Britain: (1) the image of the key worker maps onto the division of labor and onto the strategies of accumulation attached to this division; (2) the image of the key worker is mobilized to provide a justification for the hierarchies of authority that maintain this division of labor; and (3) this image of the key worker facilitates the neutralization of any resistance to this existing order of things (Althusser 2014). Taken together, these observations make up the operation of an ideology of work in Britain during the pandemic, the precise function of which is to protect and maintain capitalist social relations in a time of crisis.

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The "Key Worker" and British Capitalism in the Pandemic

The first and perhaps most important point to make is that the key worker as an ideological image *emerges* out of a particular division of labor that has been established in Britain. As Althusser (2014, 36) argued, "Every process of production entails the existence of several labour processes and thus of a set number of *posts* for qualified labour, including the posts required to organize, coordinate and manage that process of production," with those posts "filled on the basis of an implacable, insuperable class division." Importantly, it is this division of labor that provides the grounding for the ideologies of work that emerge thereafter. The reference point for the worker as "museum piece" is precisely the division of labor from which this worker is taken and the class antagonisms that dictate this worker's position within that division of labor.

The designation of certain workers as key workers, interestingly, maps onto the strategies of accumulation favored and prioritized within the British economy and the types of work associated with these strategies. In recent years, sociologists of work have attempted to explain an emerging division of labor within Western European societies, characteristic of a severe deregulation of

The ideological notion of the key worker indicates that the reason why *these* workers continue to work as opposed to other workers is that it simply *makes sense* that these workers continue to work: if the health-care workers do not work, who will care for the sick? How will you buy food if the shop workers cannot open their stores? How will these essentials be brought to the most vulnerable in society if the delivery drivers cannot work?

the labor market combined with a heightened rolling back of the welfare state and its social protections. The result has been the emergence of very particular sectors of employment as the centers of contemporary accumulation strategies within Britain—the retail sector, communications, logistics, and health care to name a few—which have been increasingly subject to this labor-market deregulation and exemption from social protection. Sociologists have summarized this development in numerous ways, relying on concepts like "precariousness" (Alberti et al. 2018) or the "gig economy" (Woodcock and Graham 2020) to describe this emerging situation in Britain and elsewhere. Certain workers have become the protagonists of this division of labor—including healthcare workers, delivery drivers and riders, telecommunications workers, and transport workers—increasingly enjoying lower wages, less rigid employment protections, and more informal employment arrangements, in keeping with their position at the center of Britain's accumulation strategy.

When the pandemic hit in Britain and vast numbers of workers had to either work from home, be furloughed until further notice, or simply be laid off, at that time the ideological category of the "key worker" emerged and mapped nicely onto the workers implicated in these central

employment sectors, immediately justifying the continuation of their work. Health-care workers, couriers, shop workers, and transport workers all find themselves on the "front line" of Britain's response to the pandemic; they are labeled as key workers and pressed into the service of keeping Britain's economy running through the pandemic. Indeed, Marco D'Eramo (2020, 26) has noticed how the division of labor in society has mapped onto the decisions made about who can and cannot quarantine, as "the privileged lock themselves in houses with fast internet and full fridges, whilst … the food industry, energy sector, transport services and telecommunications hubs must continue to operate." The division of labor itself gives rise to the ideological category of the key worker, with the integrity of this worker to the maintenance of accumulation the condition for its designation as "key."

Appeals to the notion of the 'key worker' disguise these hierarchies of authority that lie behind their mobilisation during the pandemic, mystifying the class struggle reflected in social policy exclusions such as this, which compels their continued work.

This leads to the second of Althusser's (2014) conclusions regarding the ideology of work: that the ideology of work reflects and reproduces the structures and hierarchies of authority that maintain this division of labor. Althusser was particularly adamant on this point. The division of labor in society is not kept in place by virtue of its "technical" characteristics alone—that is, by virtue of the "efficiency" or "pragmatism" of its organization—but is the reflection of very specific "hierarchical relations of authority" that maintain this division (39). In the case of the key workers described above, it is incredibly easy to

make a similar "technical" justification for their continued mobilization within the economy in Britain: is it not simply for the purposes of "efficiency" or "necessity" that these workers continue to work? The ideological notion of the key worker indicates that the reason why *these* workers continue to work as opposed to other workers is that it simply *makes sense* that these workers continue to work: if the health-care workers do not work, who will care for the sick? How will you buy food if the shop workers cannot open their stores? How will these essentials be brought to the most vulnerable in society if the delivery drivers cannot work? However, just as appeals to the "technical" necessities of work "should be rejected and denounced as pure and simple arguments of the capitalist class struggle" (36), the same courtesy should be extended to such claims regarding Britain's key workers.

This division of labor is not kept in motion by these "technical" necessities alone. On the contrary, it is kept in motion by hierarchies of authority both at the state level and at the level of individual workplaces. This is particularly evident when looking at the social-policy decisions made by the British state, which not only exclude many of these key workers from their provisions but also empower their employers to ensure that their work continues. For example, workers on zero-hour contracts (characteristic of the key workers in supermarkets and in "necessary" retail outlets) have been system-

atically disadvantaged by the British government's furlough scheme (which pledged to pay 80 percent of the wages of furloughed workers), and this has meant "in practice that workers are receiving only 50% of their usual wage or lower" (Notes from Below 2020, 46). This is because zero-hours workers tend to be disproportionately dependent on overtime payments, which have not been included in the calculation of their standard wage (to which the 80 percent payment corresponds). Similarly, the British government has implemented a Self-Employment Support Scheme, where the self-employed can apply for a grant to cover 80 percent of their profits from the government. However, these measures have systematically excluded many workers categorized as "self-employed" but still working under the umbrella of a particular company (e.g., key workers such as taxi drivers working for Uber or couriers working for Deliveroo). The support scheme disadvantages these workers (often described as being in "false" self-employment), as eligibility "relies upon profits reported in tax returns, something that many self-employed workers will either struggle to produce or will bear little relation to their income" (46). Appeals to the notion of the key worker disguise the hierarchies of authority that lie behind their mobilization during the pandemic, mystifying the class struggle reflected in social-policy exclusions that compel their continued work.

> **The ideology of the 'key worker' has produced effectively toothless forms of solidarity, organised primarily around the celebration of 'key workers' without any concerted effort to understand the social conditions that have underpinned this positionality.**

Third, the ideology of the key worker has been mobilized with a view to *repression* and to the undermining of the power of organized labor to resist or struggle against the division of labor in society (and the inequalities that persist within it). Althusser (2014, 39) described the implementation of "a form of *repression* in no way beholden to policemen, since it is exercised in the division of labour itself and by its agents," thus arguing that the division of labor in society was productive of a particular social arrangement that undermines or neutralizes resistance. This has been evident in Britain in a number of ways.

First, the ideology of the key worker has produced effectively toothless forms of solidarity organized primarily around the celebration of key workers without any concerted effort to understand the social conditions underpinning their positionality. This is particularly evident in the observation by many commentators of a renewed social solidarity that has organized itself around a national appreciation in Britain of the key worker's contribution, culminating in symbolic rituals such as the weekly round of applause given by individuals outside of their homes. As one commentator writes, "The aim is to celebrate the unsung heroes that now stand to risk most from this crisis—doctors, nurses, paramedics—who are dealing with the surge in coronavirus patients and who face a high risk of being infected, also because of the dearth of proper protective equipment and the disastrous ways in which govern-

ment is managing this crisis" (Gerbaudo 2020, 5). However, the ideology of the key worker fosters forms of solidarity, such as this one, that are so evacuated of their social and political character that they are engaged in universally: not only by workers but by the politicians, employers, and police officers that stand so often in opposition to them and are responsible for the oversight and reproduction of the very relations that make life so dangerous for these workers in the first place. This moralism has infected the labor movement itself, with major labor unions in Britain pausing industrial disputes and strikes to work cooperatively with the government to find a route through the pandemic, ignoring the very real antagonism that exists between that government and the workers the unions are supposed to represent (Notes from Below 2020).

But even though Althusser specified that these forms of repression exist independently of the police, the ideology of the key worker has been wielded by the repressive state apparatus as a way of more forcefully ensuring the survival of these strategies of accumulation amid social unrest and resistance. The police in Britain have invoked the name and image of the key worker and the imperative to "protect" and "respect" this worker as a pretext for the surveillance and disbanding of protests, picket lines, and other social movements on the grounds of public-health concerns.

The key worker has repeatedly been wielded by those who have sought to defend racism, police violence, and brutality against the recent efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement by arguing that these protestors' struggle against state-sanctioned murder and the reproduction of institutional racism is putting their health and that of key workers in the health service at risk. In fact, in many cases the category of key worker has even been applied to the police themselves, as a way of further excusing and justifying their attempts to maintain order and oversee the continuation of capitalist social relations, no matter how violently.

What this investigation reveals is that the notion of the 'key worker' is not a neutral category, merely conferring due importance to a set of workers that have persisted in their duties in Britain despite the dangers of the pandemic. Rather, the 'key worker' is symptomatic of an ideology of work set in motion within British capitalism, functioning to embed, maintain and reproduce particular relations of production and the class hierarchies reflected therein.

This investigation reveals that the notion of the key worker is not a neutral category that merely confers due importance to a set of workers that have persisted in their duties in Britain despite the dangers of the pandemic. Rather, the key worker is symptomatic of an ideology of work set in motion within British capitalism, one that functions to embed, maintain, and reproduce particular relations of production and the class hierarchies reflected therein. The key worker as an ideological image emerges out of the division of labor in British society and was mobilized at the beginning of the pandemic in order to defend important strategies of accumulation in the wake of significant labor-market changes. The image of the key worker is used to justify the structures of

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authority that continue to mobilize these workers with a view to continued accumulation, hiding the systematic exclusion of these workers from various social-policy considerations and protections behind an appeal to the "necessity" of their work. And the "key worker" as an ideological image becomes the cornerstone of the neutralization of potential resistance to these realities, providing a toothless image around which social solidarity can be built as well as a justification for the deployment of more repressive forms of social control in the face of strikes and social movements.

Class Struggle, Ideology, and the Pandemic

The fourth and final conclusion reached by Althusser (2014) in his analysis of the ideology of work is that, fundamentally, the goal of this ideological machinery is to facilitate the exploitation of wage labor. Evident in this ideology is primarily the attempt by capitalism to reproduce and maintain the relations that facilitate the exploitation of the worker. As Althusser wrote, "The sole basis and purpose of all the elements (including the three functions) just analyzed is *exploitation* of wage-workers, especially those who are the 'most exploited,' always more harshly exploited: pure agents of production or *proletarians*" (42). The point that Althusser was trying to communicate with this final conclusion is that the struggle against this ideology relies

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fundamentally on a knowledge of the precise social conditions that have produced it. Before strategies of resistance can be properly crafted and deployed, understandings of the material realities of exploitation must be accumulated, in the first instance. "Trade union activists waging the class struggle are well aware of this," Althusser wrote, as "they have to fight this ideology step by step, taking up the same combat day after day to root this mystification out of their own consciousness (no easy task) and their comrades'" (43).

This analysis reveals that the celebration of the key worker in Britain is ideologically symptomatic of the renewal and reproduction of the social relations that have governed work, production, and, thus, exploitation. These social relations are not peculiar to the pandemic itself: rather, the pandemic has been used as an opportunity to renew and bolster existing relations in a way that secures their survival throughout the pandemic and beyond. Notes from Below (2020, 52) goes further and has argued that, after the pandemic, "there will be an attempt to seriously reshape work." The task that lies ahead for organized labor is to be able to intervene in and struggle against this reshaping. Success here depends upon a confrontation of the antagonistic social relations that underpin this reshaping and a deconstruction of the ideologies that shield these relations from view.

Strategies by way of such an intervention have been put forward by commentators in Britain, who are attempting to envision more progressive changes to work following the pandemic. Some have argued that the pandemic has revealed both the necessity and the workability of a universal basic income as a potential social-policy reform that can share the risk of further economic decline from the pandemic more equitably (Harris 2020). Others have argued that this represents an opportunity to acknowledge that working time can be reduced and that the pandemic offers an opportunity to begin to reduce the working day and working week (Jones 2020). However, these strategies do not appear to adequately confront the material realities that would underpin such a change to the nature of work. The demands for a UBI or for a reduction in work are not immediately progressive demands: as this investigation has shown, the payment of workers' wages by the state and the reduction of the working day are themselves strategies that have been bound up in the very renewal of capitalist social relations in Britain throughout this pandemic. As Kathi Weeks (2016, 257–8) has written, "The models of nonwork they generate are too locked within the orbit of work as we now know it to push us very far beyond its gravity."

This analysis reveals that work remains an important site of analysis for understanding the ways in which capitalist social relations are reproduced and maintained, particularly in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic exposes this as the reproduction of the division of labor and the class relations attached to it become a priority in Britain in order to shore up the survival of important strategies of accumulation throughout this crisis. Althusser helps us to arrive at such an understanding through an analysis and deconstruction of the ideologies that are symptomatic of this process of reproduction. The emergence of the "key worker" as an ideological figure in Britain gestures toward the persistence of this reproduction throughout the pandemic. By applying particular concepts, such as those provided to us by Althusser, contemporary sociology can begin to deconstruct these ideological productions and reveal the material realities hidden beneath them: a critical exercise that is crucial to the alteration and dismantling of these realities.

Samuel J. R. Mercer is a lecturer in social policy with the School of Social Sciences at Liverpool Hope University in the UK. He writes on work and employment and recently completed a doctoral thesis titled "Humanism and the Ideology of Work."

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