

COV-WORK: Socio-economic consciousness, work experiences and coping strategies of Poles in the context of the post-pandemic crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent lockdown of a significant part of the economy as well as post-pandemic economic crisis are unprecedented events which have significantly affected various areas of social life in Poland and worldwide. According to many forecasts, the post-pandemic social and economic crisis may be even deeper than the previous one (2008+), although some predictions suggest the crisis will be rather short-lived, and economy and society will soon come back to 'normal'. In the COV-WORK research project we will explore the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic for the world of work in Poland adopting a worker-centred perspective.

The central research question is formulated as follows: To what extent has the socio-economic crisis caused by the pandemic been reflected in changes in work organisation, collective labour relations and discourse about work as well as the socio-economic consciousness of working Poles and their individual and collective life strategies? The project addresses this question by exploring social consequences of the pandemic for:

- 1) socio-economic consciousness of Poles in post-pandemic situation, including their attitudes towards capitalism, state intervention, public services, social support and collective action in labour relations;
- 2) biographical work-related experiences of Poles, including selected aspects of job quality / quality of work and workers' coping strategies in the sectors particularly affected by pandemic (health care and social care, education, logistics);
- 3) the old and new conflicts in collective labour relations and mechanisms of their alleviation and the ways of framing them by social partners (trade unions, employer organisations, public administration) and in the public discourse in both traditional media and Internet-based outlets.

We will pay particular attention to the biographical experiences and life strategies of selected groups of workers defined as 'essential' during the peak of the health crisis: doctors, nurses, school teachers as well as couriers delivering food and other goods in the period of lock-down. By studying their situation, we will explore to what extent their work was defined as essential both by themselves and in the public discourses (represented in media) and what have been the consequences for their job quality in post-pandemic period. Furthermore, we will also analyse the impact of the pandemic on the already on-going processes of digitalisation and automation of work, which in many cases contribute to the deterioration of employment conditions. In the project we will combine various research methods including original empirical studies as well as desk research. The representative data on socio-economic mentality will be obtained during the two waves of computer-aided telephone interview survey on nationwide population of adult Poles (on the samples of at least 1,200 and 600 informants, respectively). The experiences of the essential workers will be explored in-depth through at least 90 biographical narrative interviews and 13 focus group interviews (with a foresight dimension). Additionally, we will conduct 45 expert interviews with the managerial staff and employers as well as representatives of social partners (trade unions and employer organisations) at the national level and sectoral level (in education, healthcare and social care and logistics). Last but not least, in order to understand media discourse about the crisis, pandemic, changes and future of labour market we will monitor in this respects the selected press and web portals.

As a result of all these activities the COV-WORK project is expected to broaden our understanding of the post-pandemic labour market and the opportunities and threats for the contemporary world of labour. We will find out to what extent the pandemic acts as an accelerator of the trends present already in the pre-pandemic period, in particular employment precarisation, automation and digitalisation of work (including increase in remote work), erosion of social dialogue and expansion of discourses individualising work experience. We also expect that the experience of the pandemic will strengthen the national pro-labour and egalitarian component in the social and economic consciousness of working Poles. It could lead, on the one hand, to the emergence of the hotbeds of protest and mobilisation in particular in the 'essential work' sectors, but, on the other hand, may foster 'normalisation' of precariousness and acceptance for institutionalisation of 'anti-crisis' solutions conducive to long-term weakening of the world of work. What directions those processes will take and whether they are going to look the same in various sectors, we will only find out at the end of the project.