



The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon employment and inequality in the Mediterranean EU: An early look from a Labour Geography perspective

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Abstract

COVID-19 is a global pandemic but has a particular geography to it, differentially affecting people and places. Here we explore its impact upon labour markets in the Mediterranean European Union (EU) countries. Our analysis is part of a collective work-in-progress monitoring the pandemic's effects upon workers since early March 2020. First we note that there is a geographical political economy to pandemics. We then scrutinise the current pandemic's spatiality and impact upon Mediterranean EU workers. Following this, we discuss how workers are responding to the pandemic and how this is remaking the geography of employment. As such, our paper represents a contribution to the ongoing development of the Labour Geography literature. Overall, we stress that workers face a variety of choices in responding to the pandemic, choices which are, of course, shaped by the geographical contexts within which workers find themselves. In deciding whether and how to act, they are playing proactive roles in shaping COVID-19's impact upon the geography of employment and emerging labour landscapes.

Keywords

Labour agency, pandemics, regional labour markets, socio-spatial unevenness

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted every corner of the planet, leaving few people untouched in some way. Indeed, so spatially widespread has it been that a pervasive socio-spatial similitude manifested in phrases like 'we're all in the same boat' or

'the virus does not discriminate', relentlessly reproduced by mass media, has come to dominate much

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of the discourse about the collective reaction to it. However, whilst the virus itself does not pick which individuals to infect, it is clear that some people have been affected much more than have others, rendering the pandemic far from socially or spatially neutral (Bambra et al., 2020). Rather, it has exposed myriad socio-spatial inequalities. From an epidemiological perspective, data show that virtually everywhere individuals with lower socio-economic status are more likely to face exposure to the virus, and less-well-off societies exhibit more infections and higher fatality rates (Cheater, 2020). Additionally, once infected, poorer people statistically face more severe symptoms and a greater possibility of death, thanks to lower levels of healthcare access and a greater likelihood of suffering untreated pre-existing health conditions (Stachteas and Stachteas, 2020). At the same time, whilst most richer countries strive for herd immunity through widespread vaccination programs, the Global South faces critical shortages in basic resources, as the May 2021 surge of the virus in India illustrates (CNN, 2021).

If the medical crisis unleashed by COVID-19 is one thing, the economic crisis it has spawned is no less serious and no less geographically uneven. Specific sectors, like the hospitality and travel industries, have been hit much worse than others, leading to significant economic disruption for those places heavily dependent upon them, whilst places still struggling to recover from the 2008/09 global economic crisis have tended to experience worse economic outcomes than have those which were in better positions. Even in rich countries, the pandemic's economic toll is dire; in the US alone, by early April 2020 18 million jobs were lost, either temporarily or permanently (Cajner et al., 2020). For its part, the Mediterranean European Union (EU), our focus, has experienced a double financial and migrant crisis in recent years which has left it particularly vulnerable. Unfortunately, proposed responses to the pandemic have highlighted ongoing schisms between northern and southern Europe—in summer 2020, the Netherlands, Austria, Denmark, and Sweden opposed a €750-billion rescue package that would disproportionately have

helped countries like Spain and Italy unless it was connected to pension and labour market reforms, a refusal that clearly links disease and economics (Kanelleas et al., 2020).

Given the above, we offer insight on three core issues. First, we examine the geographical political economic factors behind the growing number of pandemics that threaten to go global. Second, we detail COVID-19's uneven impact across the Mediterranean EU and how this has spawned an equally uneven wave of labour agency in crucial sectors of the study area. Third, we argue for the need for (new) spatially-informed responses on the part of workers to challenge the economic precariousness unleashed by COVID-19. To do so, we draw upon our team's collective work-in-progress for the 'COVID-19 Regional Labour dashboard', a novel tool we have developed over the past few months so as to provide key evidence that may inform spatially-sensitive policies for employees and workers.¹ The paper addresses two substantial lacunae in the literature. First, despite the growing number of studies related to COVID-19's impact upon employment, these have generally focused upon national-level analyses (Coibion et al., 2020; Nicola et al., 2020), with few exceptions (Bailey et al., 2020; Burlina and Rodríguez-Pose, 2020; Kapitsinis, 2020; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Second, whilst some analyses (e.g., Mongey and Weinberg, 2020) have explored how different types of workers (e.g., those who can telework versus those who cannot) have been differentially impacted by the pandemic, few have considered the potential for workers' individual or collective agency to rework the new conditions within which they find themselves.

The paper is structured as follows. First, we provide a comprehensive conceptual framework discussing the geographical political economy of pandemics. Then, we analyse the COVID-19 pandemic's impact upon key labour indicators at the NUTS2 level for eight countries (Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Croatia, Greece, and Cyprus). Last, we discuss how workers are shaping the post-pandemic situation through their actions. The paper closes with a brief conclusion.

On the geographical political economy of pandemics

There is an ongoing debate regarding the ultimate causes of the recession associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many mainstream scholars argue that the pandemic, which they consider a phenomenon exogenous to the economy (i.e., a ‘black swan’ event), has caused the economic slump. More radical perspectives, however, offer a more nuanced explanation, arguing three main points.

First, contrary to mainstream declarations, they suggest that the world economy had not completely recovered from the Global Financial Crisis when the pandemic hit (Mavroudeas, 2020). The overaccumulation of capital that had brought about the crisis had not been rectified and capital profitability had not yet been restored to ‘appropriate’ pre-crisis levels. This was especially so in the Euro area (Ehnts and Paetz, 2021), as the subsequent regional crises and the ‘double dip’ recession that emerged in 2012 illustrate. Moreover, in early 2020, before COVID-19 erupted, there were strong signs that the advanced capitalist economies were already once again entering recession (Leach et al., 2021). Hence, although the pandemic may have acted as a trigger that accelerated the trend towards a new crisis, it was not its fundamental cause. Rather, it merely revealed how many sectors were vulnerable to any kind of disruption. The pandemic has also highlighted the unpreparedness of various national and supranational government agencies, whose responses to it have often been less than efficacious.

Second, pandemics are not simply biological phenomena exogenous to the socio-economic system but, instead, are deeply entwined with it. At the heart of this claim is the argument that capitalism creates a ‘metabolic rift’ and drastically worsens human-nature relations as it blindly promotes the commodification and exploitation of the latter, ignoring natural limitations and social consequences (Foster, 1999). This rift has been especially evident in recent years with the emergence of a series of new diseases (mainly zoonotic) with a frequency that has no historical analogue (Kuebart and Stabler, 2020). Four factors may help to explain this. First, the growth of industrialised agriculture has led to the greater use of

production methods that are designed to enhance profitability but which are causing significant environmental problems. Second, the commercial agro-industrial complex is dramatically expanding production into hitherto untouched areas, in the process bringing wider humanity into contact with diseases previously restricted locally and/or largely confined to indigenous populations. Third, the speed of modern movement is facilitating the ever-more rapid transmission of epidemics globally. Last, the commodification of the consumption and use of exotic species enhances the emergence of zoonotic diseases.

How the geography of capitalism has been made has also been central to COVID-19’s spread. As Lynteris (2020: 25) has noted, identifying COVID-19’s source point ‘has involved the combination of two mutually-entangled acts of location: the location of origins in a *species* [bats], and in a *space* [Wuhan’s Huanan Seafood and Wholesale Market]’, although its origins are still debatable (*Nature*, 2021). Likewise, its pattern of transmission across the planet has been shaped, to a great degree, by the topology of the global transportation networks connecting different places together. This topology is a manifestation of early 21st-century global capitalism’s structure, linked as it is to global production and financial systems and human migration patterns. Hence, the virus spread first to global transit/commercial centres and from there onward. Whereas the global economy’s geographic structure, then, is a creation of capitalists’ efforts to facilitate the extraction and capture of value, as well as of workers’ and others’ resistance to these efforts, it is also a biological structure, as it facilitates the exchange between places not just of commodities and value but also of microbes and viruses.

Such intertwining of the social and the biological calls for a syndemic approach to understanding the virus, one that does not see COVID-19 as simply a biological entity but one that is deeply social too (for more on syndemics, see Singer, 2009). The virus’s impact, in other words, cannot be understood by separating it from the socio-economic inequalities in which it developed and spread. A recent report by the World Health Organisation-appointed Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response

even notes that economic inequalities and capitalism's interconnectedness have been focal parameters to the virus's expansion, to the extent that the pandemic may have been preventable (Sirleaf and Clark, 2021). The above means that, rather than attributing it to the triptych of 'bats/Chinese wet-markets/eating wild animals', comprehending the pandemic's nature requires us to challenge 'mechanistic, contact-focused approaches of zoonotic infection' (Lynteris, 2020: 29) and to conceptualise humans as part-and-parcel of a multi-layered, multi-species global equation (a point which resonates with Assemblage Theory; Hinchliffe et al., 2017). Equally, it is necessary to deconstruct some of the geoimaginaries that have emerged to describe the pandemic's origins.² Hence, although some Western governments have referred to the virus as the 'Chinese virus', a discourse smacking of Orientalism, or have even gone further to claim that the virus 'obviously' originated in a Chinese military lab, a powerful alternative explanation pushed by China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has been that the virus was introduced to China by members of the United States Army who visited Wuhan in October 2019 during the Military World Games (*The New York Times*, 2020a). The discursive construction of the virus's geography of origination and transmission, in other words, has become a central dynamic in the geo-political rivalry between the planet's two largest economies and in understanding and countering the disease (Mavroudeas, 2020).

The third part of the explanation to which more radical analyses point linking the biological with the social is the fact that COVID-19 clearly presents difficult choices for policy makers, who may respond in quite different ways. This has serious consequences for the health of different populations. In particular, more radical commentators argue, there needs to be a critical approach to the question of what constitutes 'public health' and to what extent political interventions are aimed at advancing the welfare of the underprivileged or instead at simply reinforcing extant socio-economic structures and/or serving powerful interests. Hence, several governments have used the pandemic as cover for unleashing an intentional shift towards healthcare's greater privatisation. In the UK, for instance, a decade of budget

pressures led the National Health Service to enter the crisis understaffed and underfunded in terms of buildings and equipment (Davies et al., 2020: 8). The difficulties this caused have provided grist for some to argue that an even-more privatised system would have responded better (*The Guardian*, 2020). At the same time, the inability of governments labouring under various austerity measures to put funds into improved healthcare has left the citizenry to take up a large part of the slack.

Other political economic considerations have also been important in shaping the pandemic's spread and responses to it. For instance, the decision to impose border controls, the quarantining of populations, and the management of public information are highly political practices that reflect different approaches to the symptomology (Hay, 2012) of epidemiology, that is to say how states have interpreted COVID-19 as a health policy problem and then developed their interventions from this position. Furthermore, the politics of information access have also played a role. Hence, political and medical leaderships in government, national agencies, and international bodies like the World Health Organisation have often struggled to collect data and figures that might help to 'flatten the curve' and/or to communicate public health measures that will inspire consent and compliance from populations. This has led them to turn to private actors like Facebook, Google, and Amazon, who have been able to harvest huge quantities of information surreptitiously from people who are isolated in their homes and have little to do except surf the web. For those not in lockdown, governments have collaborated with various platforms to use GPS information from people's mobile phones to track their movements and so to map the disease's geographical contours and engage in contact tracing. This is part of a broader privatisation of demographic and other data within the rise of what Zuboff (2019) has called 'surveillance capitalism'.

Clearly, the measures and lockdowns imposed to try to stop the virus's spread have triggered acute drops in both national and regional GDPs around the globe, with significant economic repercussions. Thus, policy makers have often felt that they must choose between enforcing lockdowns to protect public health, which generally brings significant

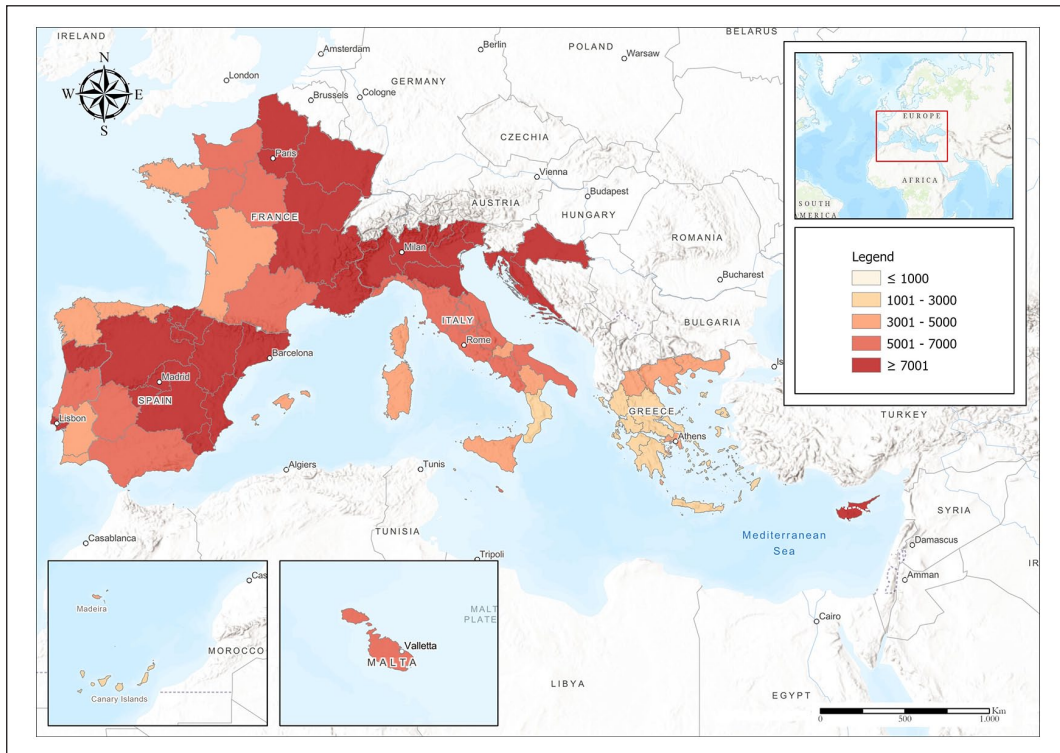
economic pain, or allowing people to work pretty much as before, which brings the danger of widespread public health problems and thus increased health demands on government budgets. Here, local political traditions have played a central role in shaping responses and mitigation plans. For instance, Anglo-Saxon capitalism's free-market ethos has been manifest in some governments' general unwillingness to provide guaranteed payments to workers to stay home, thereby forcing many of the most vulnerable to return to work and risk infection. Interestingly, although it initially adopted such a position, the UK government gradually distanced itself from this approach after seeing the virus's economic and health ravages in the pandemic's early stages (*The Atlantic*, 2020), leaving the US as the prime example. By way of contrast, in Germany and France *Kurzarbeit* and *Chômage partiel* programs allowed workers to remain at home but still receive a pay cheque. Similarly, some of the Mediterranean EU countries studied below have maintained strict measures for long periods, especially through the pandemic's second (November and December 2020) and third waves (between February and April 2021) (Hale et al., 2021). Greece, for instance, kept a lockdown in place for 7 months (from November 2020 until May 2021), limiting the activity of catering businesses, banning cultural events, and controlling citizens' mobility.

The pandemic's impact upon the Mediterranean EU

When the pandemic first emerged, populations and leaders in countries like the UK and the US were frequently criticised for failing to take COVID-19 seriously. In contrast, weakened (semi)peripheral economies like Greece were praised for their determination to overcome the crisis, with commentators linking this 'resilience capacity' to their decade-long exposure to the consequences of the 2009-2012 crisis (*The New York Times*, 2020b). As of late April 2021, however, the countries of the Mediterranean EU (Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, Croatia, France, Portugal, and Malta) were reporting almost 15 million COVID-19 cases and 335,000 deaths (Roser et al., 2021). Although spikes in deaths and cases

have not coincided in all eight countries, it is obvious that several have performed particularly poorly—Italy and Greece had crude Case-to-Fatality ratios of 3% compared to the EU average of 2.4%, whilst Italy and France were in the top fifteen countries globally in terms of deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.³

To take one example, despite its early success in limiting the pandemic's spread, the Greek government opened its borders on political grounds on 15 July 2020. Although it announced that the sudden increase in cases during August had nothing to do with this opening, with the General Secretariat for Civil Protection reporting that out of 319,379 visitors tested between 1 July and 16 August only 615 were found positive, applying the same percentage of positives to the total number of arrivals (2,592,853) suggests that, in fact, during just this time period there were likely almost 4,500 positive cases scattered across the country amongst those untested incomers (*EjSyn*, 2020). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, whilst Greece enjoyed low reported infection rates until early August, thereafter rates exploded—confirmed cases grew from 4,500 to 335,000 and deaths from 200 to over 10,000 between 1 August 2020 and 26 April 2021 (Roser et al., 2021). These skyrocketing infections, not contained by the lockdown imposed between November 2020 and May 2021, have placed significant burdens upon a healthcare system already reeling from austerity measures (including privatisation) imposed post-2009. During 2013 alone nine public hospitals (five in Athens and four in Thessaloniki) were lost, either through permanent closure or merger, one of which was the Hospital for Special Diseases that dealt with viral infections (Missiri, 2018). Additionally, though in 2009 the public sector was spending €23 billion for healthcare, ten years later the figure was just €14.5 billion. Consequently, whereas 61% of the country's primary healthcare and outpatient units' services were public pre-crisis, by 2019 only 31% were (Komninou and Bregianni, 2019). Greece, then, has seen a significant privatisation of, and cut-back in, healthcare provision, as well as increased costs for those needing it, and this has greatly affected its capacity to respond to COVID-19.



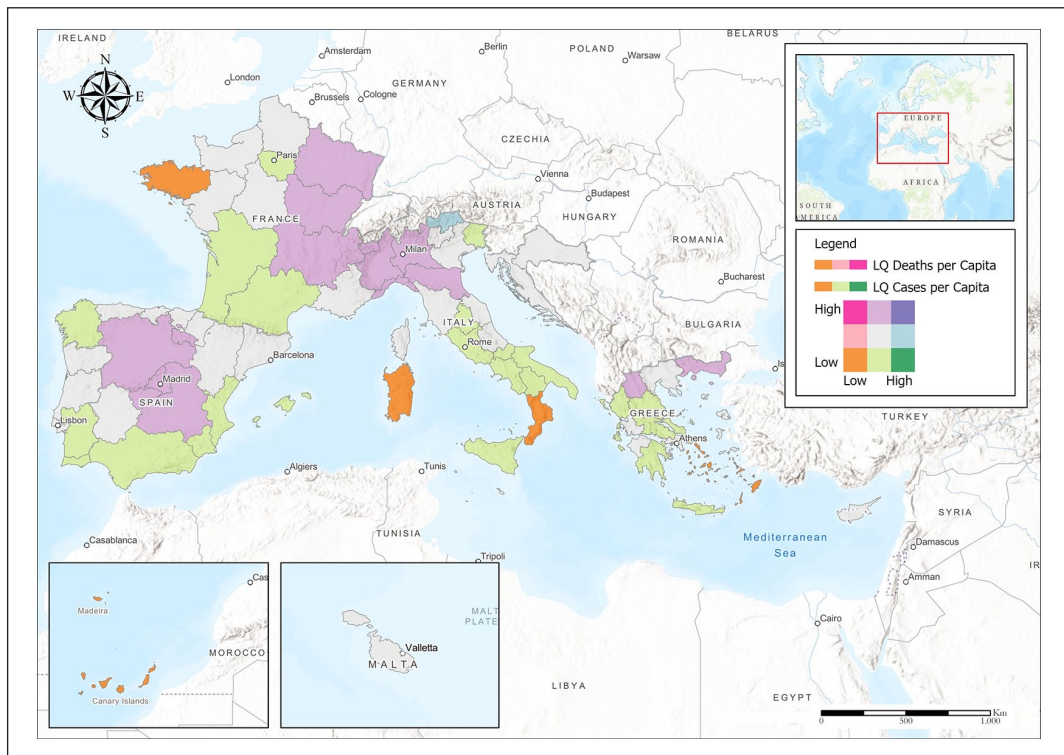
Map I. Confirmed COVID-19 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, March 2020 – April 2021, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece. Data updated 29 April 2021.

Source: <https://crl-uoa-youthshare.hub.arcgis.com/>

Across most Mediterranean EU countries, the financial crisis is combining with the pandemic to have a decidedly uneven regional impact upon production, work, and employment. This is a reflection both of the geographical pattern of the virus's diffusion, which is shaped by how the various places affected are connected together (see Maps 1 and 2), and of the underlying characteristics of the communities to which it has come. Generally speaking, and not unsurprisingly, across the region the earliest outbreaks occurred in highly-urbanised and internationally-linked locales, before emerging in places with less connection to the wider global economy (Kanelleas et al., 2020; Maloutas, 2020). One of the earliest focal points was in the cities of northern Italy, where the initial upsurge of cases has been linked to the presence of large numbers of Chinese migrants working in textile mills making clothes for

the Italian fashion industry. Having spread across northern Italy, COVID-19's epicenter then shifted to countries like Spain and Greece, though there are significant internal differences within these nations—in Spain, for instance, as of early February 2021, regions like Madrid, Catalonia, and Aragón had infection rates around double those of less-metropolitan Galicia and Asturias and Cantabria (*The New York Times*, 2021b).

In addition to showing up early in urban regions, especially capital regions, given their connection to international flows of people, the virus quickly appeared in many tourist spots, which attract visitors from other parts of Europe and the world. Significantly, though, whilst Spain, Italy, and Greece are all important tourist destinations, in Greece the pandemic's outbreak largely occurred before the beginning of the shorter (relative to Italy and Spain)

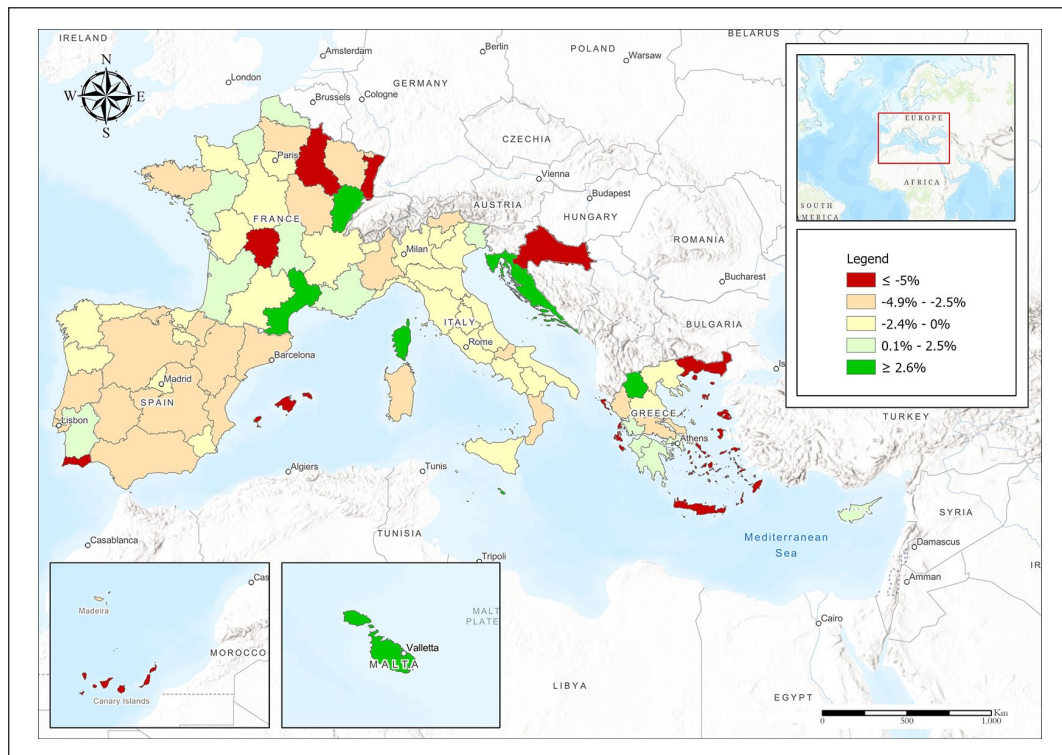


Map 2. Bivariate map of LQ values for confirmed COVID-19 cases and deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, March 2020 – April 2021, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece. Data updated 29 April 2021. **NOTE:** The location quotient (LQ) is mainly used in economic base theory to reveal particular regional over-/ under-concentrations. Here, the index refers to regional cases or deaths divided by their respective national figures. When values are higher than 1.25, the region exhibits over-concentration of cases/deaths (High in the legend); when values are lower than 0.75, the region lacks such concentrations (Low in the legend). Source: <https://crl-uoa-youthshare.hub.arcgis.com/>

tourist season, with cases principally accounted for by Greeks who travelled abroad at the beginning of March rather than by foreign visitors (Kanelleas et al., 2020). Whilst case numbers started rising during August 2020, the country's low infection rates during the pandemic's first months resulted in relatively low overall numbers compared to other Mediterranean countries (Map 1). That was so even in tourist regions, like the South Aegean, although in rural regions lacking easily accessible healthcare some limited cases were coupled with high fatalities (e.g., West Macedonia) (Map 2).

In considering the pandemic's impact upon the geography of employment, it is important to look at both overall job losses (Map 3) and losses in

particularly vulnerable sectors, like accommodation and food (Map 4). Indeed, whilst the greatest number of job losses during the early lockdown period occurred in urbanised areas (Athens, Barcelona, Madrid, Milan, Rome), unsurprisingly the pandemic has been particularly impactful in those regions with excessive dependence upon tourism. For instance, in Cataluña/Catalonia and Andalucía, Spain's two most important tourism destinations, large numbers of jobs were lost, as was the case in Madrid which, though it receives fewer visitors than popular 'sun and sea' destinations like the Balearic and Canary Islands, actually has more people working in tourism (Gómez and Salvatierra, 2018). However, whilst Map 3 shows that tourist regions



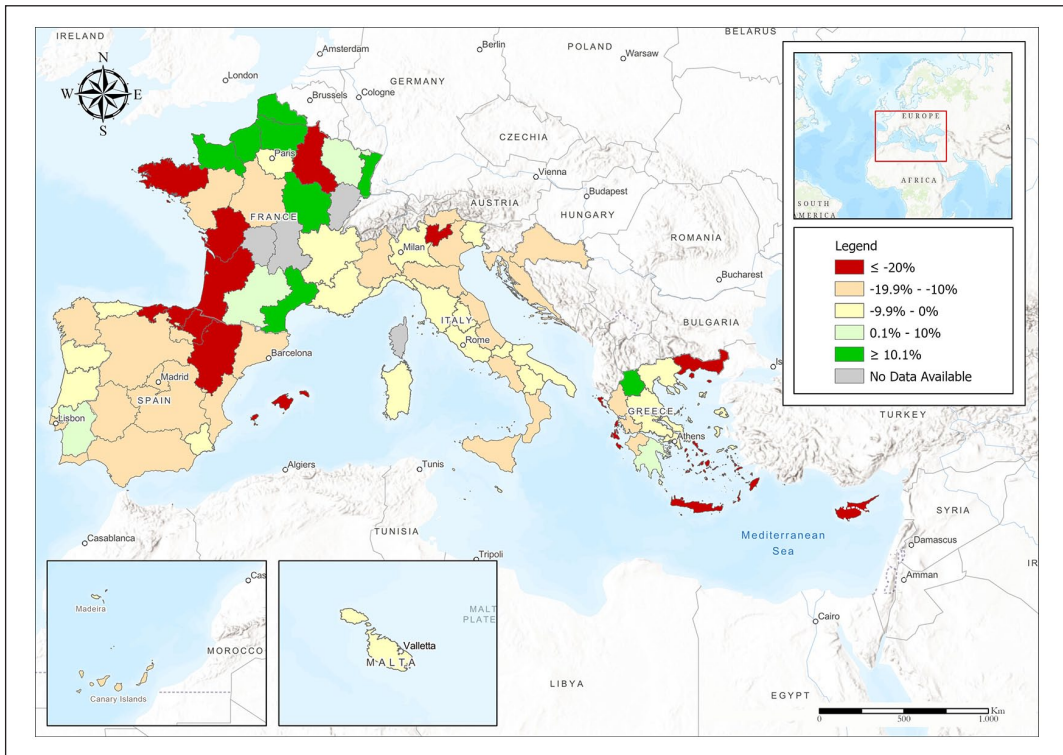
Map 3. Gains/losses (%) in total employment between 2019 and 2020, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece. Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey).

like Spain's Balearic and Canary Islands, Portugal's Algarve, and Greece's South Aegean, Ionian Islands, and Crete stood out in terms of job loss, the case is more complex in Cyprus and Malta, which gained employment overall even whilst losing tourism-related jobs (see Map 4). At the same time, a widespread employment decline is evident in several regions considered 'left-behind' (e.g., Greece's North Aegean, Croatia's Uplands and Slavonia, France's Alsace, and others).

Whilst most tourist destinations and economically-lagging regions saw significant employment losses, then, the urban and more economically-vibrant regions that were heavily burdened by the stalling of economic activities during the first stages of the virus's expansion eventually saw relatively fewer job losses (or even gains) compared to other locations, as the Madrid, Milan, and Athens hinterland regions show (tourist-heavy Barcelona constitutes a

notable exception; see Map 3). In other words, places that are more connected with the outside world saw the virus arrive earlier and so felt its impacts earlier than did less-connected places but their more diverse economies have typically allowed them to do better than have those whose economic eggs tend to be in the same basket—geography, industrial mix, and divergent policy responses clearly make a difference to how the virus affects places.

What has unfolded thus far, then, reveals only too clearly the inbuilt inequalities of contemporary Mediterranean EU society in terms of mortality, illness, and recovery. These inequalities, the result of uneven power geometries and welfare structures, generally reinforce one another. Hence, immigrant workers, who are frequently ethnic minorities, often form the cheap and necessary labour force that works those frontline jobs that are typically the least protected and least capable of being done remotely,



Map 4. Gains/losses (%) in employment in the Accommodation and Food sector between 2019 and 2020, Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Croatia, Malta, Cyprus, and Greece. Source: Eurostat (Labour Force Survey).

resulting in such minorities being disproportionately exposed to virus transmission (Fasani and Mazza, 2020). There is, though, great variation in terms of where immigrants occupy frontline positions—although across the EU 13% of frontline workers are immigrants (either intra- or extra-EU), these numbers rise to 29% in Cyprus and close to 20% in Spain and Italy, though immigrants are underrepresented as frontline workers in Greece and Croatia. They also disproportionately ‘enjoy’ lower living standards, pay cheque-to-pay cheque jobs, are more likely to commute to work using mass transit rather than private cars, and are more likely to live in substandard housing that is overcrowded and suffers inadequate ventilation, with both of these latter putting them at greater risk of virus exposure (Zissi and Chtouris, 2020: 6).

For their part, women likewise disproportionately face many pandemic impacts, being more likely than

men to lose their job and/or to have seen cut backs in work hours—across the Union the countries where women were most affected in terms of hours lost during the early COVID-19 crisis are largely Mediterranean EU ones (Italy [-10.3%], Slovakia [-10.2%], Greece [-8.3%], Austria [-7.8%], and Portugal [-6.3%]) (Eurofound, 2020: 11). Unlike in previous recessions, in which male-dominated manufacturing, construction, and other occupations were most affected, this recession has impacted female workers more, reflecting the fact that women tend to outnumber men in the sectors hit hardest by COVID-19: hospitality, travel, education, and retail.⁴ At the same time, according to the 2020 and 2021 European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) e-surveys, women have also reported more work-life balance challenges than have men. Women who have small children and who work outside the home are more than

twice as likely as men to express feelings of exhaustion (Eurofound, 2021: 3).⁵ Furthermore, as women drop out or fall out of the labour market, there is a good chance that many will never return, meaning that the effects of the recession on female employability are likely to be felt for years—the World Economic Forum (2021) terms this a ‘shecession’. Moreover, despite the early introduction in many countries of measures to support those who had lost their job, by July 2020 only 41% of the unemployed workers across the EU who responded to the 2020 Eurofound survey indicated that they had received any official financial assistance since the pandemic’s outbreak (p. 50), forcing many to rely upon informal support.

Lastly, young people have emerged as some of the lockdown’s biggest losers and, along with those out of work, have reported the lowest levels of well-being (Eurofound, 2021: 4). Many continue to feel excluded from society and remain at greatest risk of depression, suggesting that lockdown restrictions have affected them more than older people, who perhaps already have longstanding social networks with whom they can interact via Zoom and other similar media during lockdown and do not feel quite the need for face-to-face interactions.

Worker agency amid the pandemic

Interpreting and responding to pandemics is always a political act. Here we look at some of the ways in which Mediterranean EU workers have responded to COVID-19. This is particularly important because, although some success has been achieved in flattening the infection curve, as we write a third wave has only just begun to diminish, allowing governments to begin moving cautiously towards removing some restrictions. Without sufficient financial support, however, lockdowns to stop the virus’s spread have the potential either to condemn millions of workers to ever greater levels of penury or are destined to fail because these workers will have no other choice but to defy authorities in order to put food on the table. Given that those workers who have been most profoundly affected by the lockdowns imposed thus far (and by those which may be imposed in the near

future) are unevenly spread across the landscape, there is clearly a complex geography to the challenges workers face. This raises the issue of how they must think spatially in response to the pandemic.

Already there have been several examples of spatial thinking when it comes to labour agency to protect workers. For one, healthcare workers in Greece and Italy have made public hospitals key spaces of struggle and have suggested that these spaces should serve as reference points for society more broadly, given the high degree of face-to-face contact required within them. Hence, on 25 March 2020 Italy’s three trade union confederations—the *Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro*, the *Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori*, and the *Unione Italiana del Lavoro*—signed an agreement with the Ministry of Health covering essential preventative measures to protect workers in all health facilities and providing for the setting up of a national committee involving the trade unions to monitor the situation. These agreements provided inspiration for subsequent ones covering all workplaces, leading to government mandates to redesign the micro-geographies of shared spaces like dressing rooms, smoking areas, and canteens to facilitate distancing and to reorganise work spatially and temporally (e.g., reorganising shifts to reduce contact between different groups of workers and to create discrete groups that are easy to contact trace) (*Confederazione Generale Italiana Del Lavoro*, 2020). Two specific protocol agreements on COVID-19 containment measures were also negotiated for construction sites and the transport and logistics sectors.

Similarly, in Greece the *Panhellenic Federation of Public Hospital Workers* (PFPHW-ΠΟΕΔΗΝ, 2020), through strikes and other activities, has mobilised to make permanent 16,000 temporary health workers. Although a fraction of those needed even under normal circumstances, this represents an effort to force the government to spend more money on healthcare and to reverse its previous course. However, the union has met resistance. In early February 2021 the government announced prosecutions of several leaders involved in a September 2020 strike to improve health sector conditions. In October 2020 a broader coalition of public sector workers engaged in a

general strike, demanding wage increases and improved pensions to make up for what they had lost due to COVID-19 hour cutbacks, together with improved safety measures to protect against infection. Their demands also included recruitment of more teachers to enable a maximum of 15 pupils per class (again, an effort to control the micro-geographies of particular spaces) and the hiring of cleaners to maintain hygienic conditions in schools. In November hospital doctors and other medical, construction, and maritime workers (particularly important in facilitating movement between the country's many islands), amongst others, engaged in another general strike to oppose legislation, pushed by employers as a way to make up for pandemic-induced losses, requiring that workers accept a 10-hour work day whilst only getting paid for 8 hours, along with substantially lower wages and Sunday work. At a more individualistic level, some workers have chosen to migrate elsewhere, seeing movement across space as central to their abilities to raise their families—there has been an exodus from the southern EU of healthcare workers exasperated by austerity cuts (Faus and Amante, 2020).

Whereas workers have often been forced to face the binary choice of lockdown or infection, the significant geographical variations in conditions they face suggests they might do well to agitate for enactment of different support measures based upon how local labour markets are functioning rather than a one-size-fits-all model, as labour markets with greater proportions of precarious workers or which are suffering greater infection rates are likely to need different combinations of lockdown and aid than are those with lower proportions/rates. Workers' demands for new state welfare policies to assist communities particularly hard hit, then, might be most beneficial if they were to link aid levels to local conditions, so that those who do not really need much assistance do not use up limited financial resources that could better be used to support those who do. In addition to implementing such spatially-sensitive policies that accept different strategies for different labour markets, another approach would be to organise around how workers must navigate the new micro-geographies of their work spaces, many of which have been rearranged to facilitate social

distancing but whose rearrangement is redefining how certain workers must now work.

In terms of reorganising the geography of work, one strategy to which myriad employers have turned is to encourage workers—many of whom are low-paid office workers—to telecommute. Telecommuting offers advantages to capital but also poses problems. In the case of e-commerce giant Amazon, for instance, having office staff in Italy, Spain, and France telecommute has reduced some non-wage and fixed capital costs. On the flip side, though, it has made it more difficult to manage them. Furthermore, although Amazon has turned to telecommuting for some of its workers, as locked-down members of the public have increasingly come to shop online it has intensified its warehouse workers' work to meet demand (*Politico*, 2020). These workers, some of whom resent having to work face-to-face whilst office workers can stay at home, have responded to their increasingly gruelling labour conditions through strikes, official complaints to labour inspectorates, and other actions and the company has been forced both to increase *in situ* protective measures and to hire more workers in many Mediterranean EU countries in which it operates (UNI Global Union, 2020a: 17-18). At the same time, however, telecommuting has presented challenges to workers, who now must dedicate part of their living space to work activities and who often see their workday expand and their work-life balance dramatically disrupted (Gorlick, 2020; Griffith, 2020). Even worse, being isolated at home makes it more difficult for workers to organise. This is because spatial propinquity is generally important for workers to develop the informal social connections out of which feelings of solidarity can be built, which is why, in a very different context, mining firms in Western Australia have moved to a labour-control model of Fly-in, Fly-out, with miners living hundreds of miles away and commuting periodically to work (Ellem, 2015). Telecommuting can, though, also offer some opportunities for improving workers' financial situations, as the money freed up by reductions in employers' operating costs (e.g., a reduced need to heat/cool and illuminate workplaces) could potentially be made available for extra remuneration, were workers to demand this.

Given that capital's challenges are in many cases about how to deal with the new employment geographies the pandemic is creating, if workers are to be effective they and their organisations should become more attentive to these new geographies. Indeed, loss of direct supervision is now leading many employers to step up already quite common activities like monitoring employee locations via the GPS in their company-issued phone, noting their computer's idle time, using a device's webcam to monitor work, etc., in an effort to regain control over their employees (*The Washington Post*, 2020). However, not only are many employees likely to resist such excessive monitoring of what they do within what are, after all, the spaces of their own homes, even if they are 'on the clock', but the fact that efficient monitoring systems can be quite costly to operate can be a key weapon in capital-labour negotiations and might open opportunities to implement alternative arrangements, again with the savings to capital shared with labour. Where the spatial divide between the arenas of paid work and of domestic privacy should be, then, is a topic of considerable interest to both workers and employers during the pandemic and beyond. Equally, within some workspaces COVID-19 is redefining the balance between work and non-work activities and so where employees spend parts of their day. In France, for example, as a way to limit exposure to the virus, the government, unions, and employers have agreed to rescind the Labour Code's prohibition on employees eating meals at their desks, a prohibition which had previously forced them to leave the workspace to consume food (e.g., in local restaurants) (*The New York Times*, 2021a). At the same time, COVID-19 has led the government to expand its *chômage partiel* program to include temporary workers. This is proving particularly important for workers with unpaid care responsibilities (typically women), who can often only secure part-time work organised around these responsibilities but who are now more protected than prior to the pandemic (UNECE, 2021).

Another spatial matter that the pandemic has brought to the fore is a discussion regarding the effectiveness of contemporary local and international solidarity structures designed to foster worker coordination across space. Although workers'

international cooperation has deep historical roots, many labour organisations in the Mediterranean EU are now more intensively engaging in transnational initiatives to target the pandemic's negative consequences. For instance, the UNI Global Union early on established a fund to help member organisations in different countries (including some Mediterranean EU ones) respond to emerging needs, such as defending laid off teachers, media workers, and others, and collecting for advocacy purposes evidence of COVID-19's impacts upon activities and communities (Education International, 2020; UNI Global Union, 2020b). For its part, the International Trade Union Confederation, whose national affiliates represent millions of workers in our study countries, has called upon EU governments to implement wage/income protections, paid sick leave, and childcare support for frontline workers in health, retail, and other vital areas (ITUC, 2020). These calls have been effective in, for instance, forcing large platform companies in Spain to grant delivery workers rights similar to those enjoyed by dependent employees.

In addition to workplace-focused struggles, other forms of resisting precariousness have been evident in actions like calls for payment of a basic income and efforts to stop rent/mortgage payments and evictions, which have been supported by many unions and neighbourhood organisations across the Mediterranean EU and which also clearly have a geographical dimension to them (*BBC News*, 2020; *Droit au Logement*, 2021; *Infomigrants*, 2020). Hence, not only are these struggles manifested differently in different places—the relative importance of rent and mortgage suspensions in alleviating vulnerability is highly country- and even city-dependent—but they are also about ensuring a continued right to the city for all, not just the wealthy (Lefebvre, 1968).⁶ They are, in other words, about making much broader links between the workplace and the wider built environment.

Conclusions

Our paper presents a theoretically-informed preliminary study of the COVID-19 pandemic's spatiality. Specifically, we highlight that although urban regions and more-developed areas felt its impacts earlier,

tourism-dependent and peripheral regions eventually saw proportionately much higher job losses. Such polarisation, we suggest, clearly reveals the inbuilt inequalities of contemporary Mediterranean EU states and regions, both in terms of mortality, illness, and recovery, and in terms of work and welfare. Given that the virus's impact is connected to its socio-spatial context, different groups of employees' responses have also been geographically-sensitive and context-specific. Our analysis of these spatially-varied responses, then, contributes to the burgeoning Labour Geography literature by shedding light on the diverse and geographically-uneven forms of labour agency emerging in the Mediterranean EU in the pandemic's wake.

The cases of labour agency briefly presented highlight that workers' collective responses to the pandemic are being shaped by the geographical contexts within which they find themselves, from workplace micro-geographies to daily commuting patterns and housing realities (Gialis and Herod, 2014). At the same time, though, they are transforming these contexts through strikes, trans-regional solidarity events organized in almost all study countries to rework the geographical scale at which workers and their organisations operate, and other actions. For instance, public healthcare workers' activities have played important roles in shaping both COVID-19's spatial dynamics and the geography of employment, forcing governments across the region to spend millions of extra Euros for the first time since the late-1990s and securing changes in how the sector operates. The emerging labour landscapes in the health sector (how many work, where, and under which conditions) thus bear the mark of myriad healthcare workers' efforts to improve conditions for themselves and their patients. Examples of workers shaping employment, investment, and the spatiality of work in other sectors likewise highlight labour agency.

The pandemic's disruption of supply chains has dramatically revealed how some workers are interconnected spatially. This is providing an opportunity for labour organisations to engage in supply chain mapping projects as a preliminary step in developing stronger transnational linkages between workers in the same global production network (Hastings, 2016;

Strauss, 2020). The demonstrations against Amazon, whose CEO Jeff Bezos has seen his personal wealth mushroom during the pandemic, are just one potent example—as Valter Sanches (General Secretary of the IndustriALL Global Union), Christy Hoffman (General Secretary of the UNI Global Union), and Casper Gelderblom (the Make Amazon Pay coordinator for The Progressive International) (2021) have put it with acute spatial insight, 'there is labor resistance all over Amazon's global map, with strikes and protests from Spain to São Paulo, from Delhi to Berlin'. The closing of borders to contain the virus's spread has likewise highlighted the role of migrant and young workers in various sectors, raising possibilities about organising along migration chains or fighting youth precariousness, respectively. COVID-19 has also brought the plight of frontline employees, often previously invisible, to the attention of the general public, forcing governments (as in Spain) to implement various extra provisions for platform and gig economy employees. Such recognition provides political openings for building new consumer-worker coalitions that may lead to improvements in working conditions for such workers and others.



The above remarks are not meant to ignore the fact that many states have provided funding to pandemic-hit firms and employees for their own reasons (such as retaining legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens). Rather, what we stress here is that governments have often turned from being 'hesitant' to being 'supportive' due to the omnipresent 'threat' of labour militancy should they fail to act. Our point, though, is that workers have been important shapers of how the pandemic has evolved spatially and temporally. Recognising how workers have been spatially aware during the pandemic and how their actions have shaped its spatiality speak to themes long central to Labour Geography, including understanding how the nature of place and how places are geographically connected impacts workers' lives, as well as how workers must engage with geographical difference to proactively network and organise across multiple spatial scales. Given that the double economic and health crisis is exposing workers to circumstances that combine the local with the global in complex and uneven ways, avoiding things like job loss may require workers not only to draw upon

the resources of their own community but also upon the solidarity of workers located elsewhere. However, calls for solidarity to protect jobs in particular locales when jobs are disappearing across many countries should not degenerate into reactionary action and geographical/political nationalism, but need to maintain an internationalist character of transformative solidarity (Johns, 1998; Strauss, 2020). Workers face a variety of choices, which are, of course, shaped by the geographical contexts within which they find themselves. In deciding whether and how to act, they can play proactive roles in shaping how the pandemic's geography continues to evolve, in the process helping to shape their own destinies.

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Notes

1. The COVID-19 Regional Labour dashboard is part of the 'COVID-19 & Labour in Southern EU Regions' website (<https://crl-uoa-youthshare.hub.arcgis.com>), which presents statistical data concerning the pandemic and its impact upon employment. Regional statistics are presented for Greece, Cyprus, Italy, Spain, France, Portugal, and Malta, and currently cover all NUTS-II level entities of all Mediterranean EU states. The dashboard incorporates data from Labour Force Surveys and other sources to show the pandemic's impact over time upon overall employment, youth unemployment, and those 'Not in Education, Employment, or Training' (NEETs).
2. Significantly, Derrida (1994: 12), often seen as deconstruction's originator, used the image of a virus to describe his approach to the practice, stating that: 'All I have done. . .is dominated by the thought of a

virus. . .The virus is in part a parasite that destroys, that introduces disorder into communication'.

3. Data from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/data/mortality>.
4. Other Global North economies have also experienced this pattern. In Australia, men held 85% of the jobs lost in the early 1990s recession and 76% of those lost in the early 1980s recession, but women have lost more jobs to COVID-19 (Megalogenis, 2020). McKinsey & Company (2020) estimate that, globally, women's jobs are nearly twice as vulnerable to COVID-19-induced loss as men's, estimating that global GDP growth could be \$1 trillion lower in 2030 than it would be if women's unemployment simply tracked men's in each sector.
5. Similar trends have been observed in the US, at least in higher-income families where there is a greater possibility for parents to work remotely, as women have often taken up more of the slack with domestic chores than have their male partners (see Shockley et al., 2021).
6. Not only does the proportion of the population vulnerable to losing access to housing vary across Europe, but in countries like Italy and Germany suspending rent payments would reduce vulnerability to a greater degree than would suspending mortgage payments, whereas in Belgium and Portugal the opposite is true (Midões and Seré, 2021: 87).

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