

# Covid-19 (UK): The Necropolitics of Heroism

From Individual Gestures to Classwide Solidarity

Saturday 6 June 2020, by [LAS HERAS Jon](#), [LESUTIS Gediminas](#) (Date first published: 18 May 2020).

**Several weeks ago, the British and international media reported that “Eastern European” workers are being flown into the UK, and other European countries such as Germany, to perform “vital” work such as picking fruit and vegetables on large industrial farms. [1] This news, however, has fallen on deaf ears. So far, there has been no wide public recognition of the vitality of their labor. Unlike other essential frontline workers—particularly healthcare staff who have been publicly and politically praised as heroes of our time—there will be no claps for these farm workers. [2] With some media not even mentioning the specific countries of their origin, such as Romania and Bulgaria, in the public discourse, these workers are not even people with nationalities—just bodies flown on charter planes from the poor regions of “Eastern Europe”.**

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In the current context of the pandemic, in which the politics of life and heroism are at its most visible, we ought to ask why at a time of crisis some workers become heroes and others do not. What is actually achieved through this differentiation of lives and professions, between those worthy of a hero’s name and those who are not, in both public and political discourses that have been activated at the time of the Covid-19 crisis? [3]

When we recognize someone’s act as heroic, we actively differentiate between that person and ourselves, the rest, the non-heroes. Such heroic type of action goes beyond presupposed normal ways of behaving when securing one’s well-being; instead, it implies a great deal of self-sacrifice for the benefit of others. In the current moment, to be heroic is to be selfless—it is to take risks, to expose oneself to the coronavirus in order to save others.

However, when such behavior is generalized, then the heroic dimensions lose their mythic powers and instead become mundane. In other words, if all of us are heroes, then none of us are heroes at all. Therefore, in our neoliberal competition-based society, the name of a hero is evoked, or supported, by the political class when it is necessary to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation, praising some workers and systematically forgetting the rest. We currently see this with the public and political glorification of frontline healthcare workers, and further marginalization of other frontline workers, including farm laborers, cleaning staff, shop floor staff, garbage men, or delivery drivers.

In this text, we argue that instead of engaging in the discourse of heroism, in the current moment of

crisis it is important to reconsider our economic, social, and political lives in a more inclusive, participatory, and solidaristic manner. This requires immediate and direct engagement with political and economic systems that structure our personal and working lives in order to transcend individual gestures such as public clapping campaigns. Let us explain.

### **‘Heroes’ of our time**

Calling frontline healthcare workers heroes—and thereby glorifying the sacrifice they are currently making in our collective fight against the coronavirus—obscures the broader political context of the current situation. What is it that makes their sacrifice particularly extraordinary: is it the basic medical supplies such as protective personal equipment that are missing, or their long working hours? [4] Is it retired staff or students stepping in to fill the widening gaps in the National Health System? [5]

Focusing on the “heroism” of such actions, however, we lose sight of the broader context and the systemic political neglect of national health and social security systems. In the UK, in the last decade of inhumane austerity politics, the National Health System has faced an enormous political assault and continuous budget cuts imposed by the Conservative Government. This political disdain for healthcare workers was made abundantly clear when the Secretary of State for the Home Department Priti Patel, in her insidious mission of rearranging national emigration rules, publicly described frontline healthcare work as non-skilled. [6] What Patel did not say but implied was that these workers are superfluous, and that for the UK to elevate its global competitiveness standards, health workers should be recorded with the liabilities, not with the assets.

Ironically, this rhetoric changed drastically with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The Prime Minister of the Conservative Party that time and time again cursed the NHS—and even happily applauded the Parliament’s decision not to increase wages for nurses [7]—now, having recovered from the coronavirus that left him hospitalized in the intensive care unit, admits that he “owes his life to NHS.” [8] In fact, the moment could have not been more opportune to focus on the heroism of the NHS in order to forget the politically-constituted setting that makes the work of frontline healthcare workers appear heroic.

Similarly, even the majority of the British public that election after election has bestowed executive powers on the Tories—and thus also voted for the systemic assault on the NHS—is also readily endorsing the heroism of healthcare workers. In spite all that we have not done to protect them, healthcare workers are our heroes now. Today, in the midst of a global pandemic, the vitality of their work is something we can all grasp. We easily feel our own vulnerability to the virus and thus we can clearly see the link between us and these healthcare workers and how fundamental they are for us to persist, even more so under the dire conditions we as a society have generated for them to tackle the pandemic. The least we can do now is applaud them to show our appreciation—particularly on Thursday night when the nation is supposed to come together and feel unity in our collective fight against the coronavirus. Those not participating will be named and shamed for failing to participate in this public appreciation of the sacrifice. [9]

Unfortunately, our collective cheering helps very little to the exhausted healthcare workers. Endorsing their heroism in the fight against the coronavirus, we are actually praising them for persevering despite their dangerous work environments and conditions. They are not doing anything wrong—their efforts are truly admirable—but their actual work, as well as personal lives, are not likely to be improved if we do not fiercely confront current economic policy making. However, this so far has not been addressed in the public discourse. Instead, names and photographs, brief life

stories of those NHS workers fallen in our collective fight start to appear in the media. [10] It is the coronavirus that killed them and not policies towards fiscal austerity and privatization of healthcare pushed forward by the Conservative Government. The sacrifice of few is justified for the well-being of all. The public opinion seems to have been that, if this is to happen again, we shall be fine—we have a devoted army of hospital workers that, no matter what, will relentlessly care for us. This is the egotistic sacrifice of the few so that all can remain the same, unmoved.

## **“Non-heroes of Our Time”**

On the other hand, the so-called “Eastern Europeans,” flown from their countries with fewer COVID-19 cases in order to secure the continuous agricultural production in Western Europe in exchange for minimum wages, are not deemed worthy of public attention. They are not heroic. It is not their vocation, nobility of their profession, or the vitality of their technical skill that makes them chose the jobs that they undertake. In the economic and political context of Europe, in which transnational migrant worker networks are necessary for the profitability and sustainability of the agro-food industry, they have very little choice but to go into this undervalued work out of economic necessity. [11] Their sacrifice is not driven by collective need to overcome a crisis but by individual despair. [12]

Common sense tells us that picking vegetables is not something that requires a specific skill. On the contrary, jobs that need the physical capacity to perform manual farm labor could be easily done by many currently furloughed British citizens. However, even in the time of crisis, there is little willingness to do it—there are others who will undertake these jobs. The Brits who, somewhat willing to do this work, express their shock about the working conditions offered to them. [13] However, the shock is not that some workers such as migrants have no choice but accept such working conditions; instead, the issue is that British workers need better—after all, they are not poor migrant laborers. Although never stated explicitly, this, however, implies that the lives of these people are less significant than those of the British public—because they are just “Eastern Europeans” and the general British public can easily forget the fact that they will be doing this farm labor in spite of the pandemic. And they can die doing it, because they are already non-living—nameless, nation-less bodies flown into our country in charter planes—and settled in distant and “safely” supervised lodgings. They get the money that they came for and we eat their produce, what is wrong with that?

If we took our eyes away from their monetary compensation, we would see these “Eastern European” workers that travel at the time when the skies have gone quiet, are doing something extraordinary—they are coming to save us from our own complacency of exploitation rampant in agro-business and a lack of will to make a sacrifice. It is not just them; it is also other frontline workers—cleaning staff, shop floor staff, garbage men, or delivery drivers - that are equally forced to work under dangerous conditions, but are not clapped for.

However, calling farm or other essential workers heroes might be a wrong noun all together. Just like the NHS workers, “Eastern Europeans” are not heroes. There is nothing heroic about involuntarily putting of one’s life in danger in order to ameliorate conditions created by neoliberal regimes that thrive off of disposable lives. In other words, in neoliberal societies where governments have systematically eroded labor conditions, all precarious frontline workers—in fact, all workers—have to endure different forms of exploitative working conditions. And because we are all exposed to these dynamics, we cannot glorify these conditions. Therefore, none of us are heroes—for there is nothing extraordinary in our struggle to earn a better life. It is just a mundane coping with the systemic conditions that aim to make our lives less and less livable.

Therefore, in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic and multiple challenges that it presents to our societies, rather than embracing the language of heroism—that is instrumental in obscuring relationship of social and political exploitation—publicly and individually, as thinkers and workers, we ought to think about deeper relations that systems of power obscure us from seeing. Rather than just clapping for those workers who are being sacrificed to fill the gaps created by political decisions, we need to build a collective memory that is not subsumed to the interests of the political class that does not want us to recognize each other as exploited by the same neoliberal logic. We ought to reflect on how these symbolic actions serve the interests of the political elites and the divisions they create. In other words, there needs to be mobilization against political glorification of workers exploitation and sacrifice. What could this mean in practice?

Opposite to passive forms of ambiguous solidarity, more active and inclusive ways of intervention would imply supporting and engaging in new methods of collective action that reflect upon and take advantage from the political contradictions that the COVID-19 has brought to the fore. During the pandemic, a wave of strikes has occurred across the globe and yet we remain uninformed about their potential lessons: that some workers have not bought into hegemonic discourses of heroism that push them to risk their personal safety under poorly conditioned spaces of their professional activity.

In the case of healthcare workers, for example, the most salient case has probably been that of 4,000 nurses in Papua Guinea who protested against their government for not taking adequate measures to tackle the pandemic effectively. [14] Similar struggles have taken place in Zimbabwe, Malawi, Bangladesh, or Pittsburgh in the US and threats to walk out have occurred in such places as Medway in the UK, Hong Kong in China and Jakarta in Indonesia. [15] These cases highlight a collective refusal to follow a political idealization of healthcare workers as blind heroes, and further exposes the contradictions of neoliberal discourses that treat them simultaneously as national martyrs and wage-workers whose working conditions are only an accounting cost. Their struggles pose a pertinent question to the rest of the population: would you be willing to clap for those workers who decline to save our lives because they want to preserve theirs?

The answer is that we should not just clap for them but actively support them in their struggle for better working conditions and a better life. The current moment of crisis opens a repertoire of active solidarity with our peer workers-citizens and lays it bare that we need to extend solidarity networks to tackle the pandemic beyond the healthcare sector. Understanding the condition of healthcare workers not as unique but as systemic in neoliberal societies we should ask ourselves if we are secured too, and whether our employers have made sure that our lives are not recklessly being put into danger in order to secure corporate activity. As we have seen in other contexts, this sort of direct challenge to neoliberal treatment of the pandemic has also produced a wave of strikes in shipping and logistic companies like Amazon, private and transport workers, industrial or manufacturing sites. [16] If we are not in such conditions, we can still think of the ways to support other workers that we know have been endangered, like supermarket workers, shop assistants, street cleaners and so on, and condemn managers publicly or even legally for their abuses.

The current pandemic and the lockdowns have generalized precariousness and tens of millions of workers risk being laid off. A conscious and solidaristic action would not allow governments to implement neoliberal policies that embrace individual-based measures of risk management; instead, we must advance pro-labor policies that revert the worrying unemployment, inequality and poverty rates that the current neoliberal crisis management is spiking across the world. [17] Therefore, in the first instance, leftist political parties and social movements should press parliaments and the executive, if not widely denouncing them all together, to pass labor laws that set limits to how corporations may dismiss their workers under the incoming economic crises and establish procedures to, in case it was required, temporarily halt the employment contract so that after the

lockdown labor rights are secured as much as possible. [18]

Second, during the pandemic (and thereafter) all workers who have lost their wages, or those who have been permanently laid off, should be provided unemployment benefits, or any sort of basic income. The latter might resemble a policy that the social democratic alliance between PSOE and Podemos are currently considering of passing in Spain. [19] Though these measures are not enough, they at least point in the right direction: we should socialize the economic impact and ensure that solidarity goes beyond vacuous public performances of appreciation and leads to real and effective political intervention. Progressive fiscal policies are possible only with a heightened coordination between governments, central banks and other governments so that potential inflationary spikes are spread among as many national territories as possible. Such international coordination seems to start taking shape between Spain, France, Italy, and Portugal that demand a more cohesive fiscal and monetary policy to the European Monetary Union to avoid “extinction.” [20]

At a more radical level, the COVID-19 crisis, although deeply painful, presents us with an historical opportunity to challenge the ongoing gendered and racialised divisions of labor that devalue social reproductive labor including—but not limited to—healthcare work. In this context, we need to politicize the conditions and rewards in which these labors are undertaken delinking them from monetary evaluations, fostering the articulation of computation system in which basic needs and scarce resources match, and promote their rotation in an inclusive and consensual basis. [21] In order to know the value of other tasks in the reproduction of life, for example, civil servants that have less workload due to Artificial Intelligence induced economies of scale, could be transferred and asked to engage in caring activities for people in need, supporting precarious staff at the workplace (e.g. cleaners, security, cooking personnel), or engaging in the promotion of new formative and supportive activities with unemployed and marginalized citizens who have difficulties to survive to the labor market. This could also be applied to other sectors, so that we can enhance democratic and solidaristic values of our society. Of course, this must emerge only after important debates at the workplace, in different sectors, at national, regional, and international scales. But the underlying ethics points towards a question we ought to consider as human beings living in capitalism: how could we behave and participate in a society in different ways so that we prioritize diversity rather than specialization, increasing the chances to understand and live like the Other.

In the current moment of social and political rupture—particularly when the name of a hero is evoked and supported by the political class in order to obscure the existing forms of power and exploitation in our neoliberal societies—we ought to be vigilant not to split our society into heroes, those who are not worthy of that name, and the rest of us clapping for some but not for other frontline workers. Because we should not praise the political sacrifice that the name of a hero masks, and instead cheer a dignified life that we all deserve to have and all of those, from healthcare to farm workers, who, consciously or not, strive to make it happen.

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**P.S.**

• Spectre. 18 May 2020:  
<https://spectrejournal.com/the-necro-politics-of-heroism/>

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## Footnotes

- [1] BBC News, 16 April 2020 [“Eastern Europeans to be flown in to pick fruit and veg”](#), Aljazeera, 16 April 2020 [“Eastern Europeans flown in for ‘vital’ jobs on UK, German farms”](#).
- [2] *Express*, 28 April 2020 [“Nation unites for minute’s silence to honour NHS heroes who died fighting coronavirus”](#).
- [3] *The Sun*, 23 April 2020 [“LOUD AND PROUD Millions across the UK clap and cheer for brave NHS heroes along with Nightingale hospital staff”](#), *Express*, 12 April 2020 [“Our NHS heroes pay a heavy price - Matt Hancock pays tribute to front line victims”](#).
- [4] *Daily Telegraph*, 17 April 2020 [“NHS medics told to reuse PPE and wear aprons if gowns not available as stocks fall ”](#).
- [5] *Independent*, 30 March 2020 [“Coronavirus: 20,000 retired NHS staff have returned to fight Covid-19, Johnson says”](#), *The Guardian*, 10 April 2020 (“‘We stand together’: how students are helping NHS during coronavirus crisis  
-><https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/schools-students-teacher-nhs-coronavirus-ppe>].
- [6] BBC News, 19 February 2020 [“Immigration: No visas for low-skilled workers, government says”](#).
- [7] *Express*, 19 May 2020 [“NHS pay: Which MPs voted AGAINST NHS pay rise in 2017?”](#).
- [8] *The Telegraph*, 11 April 2020 [“‘I owe my life to the NHS’, recovering Prime Minister tells friends ”](#).
- [9] Sky News, 24 April 2020 [“Coronavirus: Woman ‘named and shamed’ by neighbours on Facebook for not joining clap for carers”](#).
- [10] *The Telegraph*, 20 May 2020 [“These are the health workers who have died from coronavirus ”](#).
- [11] *Limes*, 15 April 2019 [“Can Europe Do More for Migrant Farm Workers?”](#).
- [12] European Coordination Via Campesina [“Sowing Injustice, Harvesting Despair: Abuse and Exploitation of Foreign Agricultural Workers”](#).
- [13] *The Guardian*, 20 April 2020 [“‘Just not true’ we’re too lazy for farm work, say frustrated UK applicants ”](#).
- [14] *The Guardian*, 30 March 2020 [“‘Papua New Guinea is not prepared’: 4,000 nurses to strike over Covid-19 readiness”](#).
- [15] AP News, 25 March 2020 [“Zimbabwe doctors, nurses strike over little virus protection”](#), France24, 20 April 2020 [“Covid-19: Malawi nurses go on nationwide strike over poor working conditions”](#), *The Daily Star*, 25 March 2020 [“Intern doctors on strike demanding PPE”](#), *The Hill*, 25 March 2020 [“Pittsburgh sanitation workers walk out over lack of protective equipment”](#), *Kent*



Online, 24 march 2020 ["Coronavirus Kent: Medway binmen and street cleaners threaten to strike"](#), HKFP, 13 February 2020 ["Coronavirus: Unions urges medics to halt work if Hong Kong Hospital Authority cannot provide adequate protective gear "](#), TempoCo, 26 April 2020 ["COVID-19 Impact on the Mudik Tradition in Indonesia"](#).

[16] Wikipedia ["Strikes during the COVID-19 pandemic"](#).

[17] World Bank Blogs, 20 April 2020 ["The impact of COVID-19 \(Coronavirus\) on global poverty: Why Sub-Saharan Africa might be the region hardest hit"](#).

[18] ILO Monitor 1<sup>st</sup> Edition, 18 March 2020 ["COVID-19 and the world of work: Impact and policy responses"](#).

[19] Reuters, 17 April 2020 ["Spain to pay basic income to help poorest weather coronavirus"](#).

[20] *Financial Times*, 8 May 2020 ["Spain's deputy PM calls for EU to step up or risk extinction"](#).

[21] The International Journal of INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY, Vol.1, No.2 (January 2005) ["Participatory Economics \(Parecon\) and Inclusive Democracy"](#).