

Post-Pandemic Struggles in Social Reproduction: Lessons from the Therapist Union in Georgia

Tuesday 20 October 2020, by [JAPARIDZE Sopiko](#) (Date first published: 16 September 2020).

To further develop and strengthen common work and understanding across post-communist countries, as well as Europe and beyond, we have compiled a report and analysis of Solidarity Network's labor organizing of behavior therapists during the pandemic. We chose this experience in organizing workers in social reproduction to highlight the challenges and opportunities the pandemic and life after the pandemic presents for us. The recently created therapist union is attempting to overcome decades of austerity, virtual adoption of the neoliberal framework, devaluation of social reproduction, both unpaid work inside the home and paid work, lack of legal protection, and the effective disappearance of the worker from both discourse and policy.

Parents with children who are on the autism spectrum had been fighting for a government-funded autism program for years with the support of donors and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Finally, in 2015, the autism program was created under each city's jurisdiction. It allocated a certain amount of lari (Georgian currency) per child. It was wildly popular, and there were waiting lists to get children into these programs. A few for-profit centers were created to receive the incoming children and the now steady stream of government funding. The new program also created a demand for behavior therapists that were hired by these centers. Many young people flocked to these jobs since unemployment and structural unemployment are quite high in Georgia. Since this program was created by the input of parents, centers, and the government, and not therapists acting in their capacity as workers and not just educational design, labor rights were never taken into consideration.

Due to this program being popular among parents and to make it more successful both in terms of garnering support for the government and to include more children, each year the program must grow. As a PR move by the authorities and in perfectly neoliberal fashion, the program is designed to maximally showcase how the children are receiving the money per head and to hide who does the work. One way an increase in the number of children enrolled per year was achieved was that the Tbilisi mayor reduced the amount per child a couple of years ago. Another, and the most important, way is that costs have been kept down through wage theft. The therapists only get paid if the child comes to their scheduled session. Every month, non-attendance leads to a 15-20% loss of wages for each therapist, which then funds other children to be added to the program. At the beginning of the year, money is allocated to a certain amount of therapy sessions per child, and when they do not attend their sessions for various reasons, the money doesn't go to the therapist but goes back into the program, thus making it possible for another child to be added, thus increasing the program's and the mayor's approval ratings. And yet this principle effectively sets the interest of the parents who are waitlisted against the interest of the therapists. More children getting much-needed therapy comes at the cost of therapists' much needed decent wages and stable working conditions. Wages

also do not take into account all the work done in preparation for each session.

According to the Georgian labor code, each worker is entitled to one month-long paid vacation per year. These therapists do not get paid either at all or the full amount because their pay is contingent on completed behavior therapy sessions even though during August almost everyone is on vacation and most children do not attend any sessions. Besides, during certain months like January, which is a holiday month, few children attend their appointments.

Some therapists are also classified as independent contractors and some are classified as workers – depending on the specific center. Depending on the classification, the centers are either breaking the labor code of conduct or not. More importantly, since these centers only exist due to the funding through each city's autism program, even those that are classified as wage workers, are unable to go far with using labor laws since their immediate employer (subcontractor) has little to no power in their ability to satisfy the therapists' main demands – to end wage theft and create more stable working conditions. The therapists can start a labor dispute but won't be able to get their demands met unless the mayor takes responsibility and voluntarily asserts its role as an employer. Legally, there is no way to bring him to the table. Because of the pandemic, strikes are impossible to organize since the work is already functionally stopped. Striking in any situation would include legal and illegal strikes since the therapists are (mis)classified as both independent contractors and workers, thus having different rights and legal protections.

The therapists have lived under these contradictions and highly precarious work relations for years. More or less, their anger has waxed and waned without organizing themselves. Then the pandemic hit and all schools closed down. They were left without a paycheck and no way to afford basic subsistence. About sixteen therapists from different centers came to Solidarity Network (SolNet) to organize a union and get paid during the pandemic – at this time, we didn't know how long the shut-down would last. There were a few challenges from the beginning: the whole country was on lockdown; the employers running the autism centers have little power; the mayor holds all the power; the financing scheme of the program is antagonistic to therapists; our ability to organize is very limited. More importantly, the therapists disclose that the parents association of children with autism has been hostile to them, and they are expecting pushback from the association's leadership. There also seems to be a division between the leadership and the rank-and-file parents. The therapists mention that the often-stated line against them has been "This is the children's money." In fact, the funding scheme has been set up to be both politically profitable for the ruling party and used by a certain part of the parents and the mayor as a tool to morally beat down the therapists whenever they speak up about labor conditions. So our aim was to get support from the parents as well as organizing most of the therapists under our union to show unity and high numbers.

At first, the therapists did not believe most parents would support them. In order to neutralize the parent's association leadership, we made our own petition and reached out to parents directly – we cut out the association as the mediator between parents and therapists in order to amass a certain number of parents who would support us. Then once we had a certain percentage, we would invite the leaders to sign the petition to make them feel included. We agreed at the meeting that each therapist would try to get one parent to sign a petition and recruit five therapists. The demands were to get paid during the pandemic as before and upon reopening, all decisions regarding continuation should be made with the therapist union present. Since we knew how the parents and mayor used moralism to exploit the labor of therapists, refusing to make up any work would have been too controversial and might have damaged unity among therapists since many therapists had also felt morally obliged to make up hours and between therapists and the parents, we left the makeup hours deliberately vague. SolNet prioritizes democratic decision making at the workplace and fights for democracy beyond typical economic demands. Since we know that democracy in the workplace is important for workers and that the employers are always the most reluctant to give up

any power, we used the post-pandemic demand of the working group as a jumping point to establish a process where workers were included in decision making regarding the program.

The petition was wildly successful. Instead of the expected 50 parents, the therapists got over 700 parents to sign on to it. Almost all the therapists - 300 of them - were organized under our union. By the time the parents' association knew what had happened, we had almost all the parents on our side. The leader of the association tried to intervene and demand conditions that the therapists get an advance during the pandemic and then make up the missed hours later on - which would have exacerbated labor exploitation due to violation of overtime pay laws. The centers had a meeting with the union, and they were trying to reduce our demands to partial payment through the pandemic. After a brief dispute - it is also important to note that the centers had never sat down with any of the therapists before as equals to make decisions together - some of them definitely attempted to treat the therapist union leader as a subordinate, unable to grasp that they aren't in charge right now. One director of a center told another one to "control her employee" who was speaking out. Overall, the circumstances that both the centers and therapists were depending on mutual victory against the mayor to get paid, forced the employers to reconsider their approach to the therapists. The centers were going to negotiate with the mayor later that day, but made it clear to them that they weren't going to reign in the therapists if the mayor didn't agree to continue the salaries during the pandemic.

Afterward, a well-publicized press conference was held by the therapists. The mayor was feeling the pressure - parents, therapists, and centers were united. He went from categorically saying the therapists weren't going to get anything to saying during his press conference that the therapists were going to get paid now but that they had to make up the hours. It was a victory for the time being.

Two problems emerged. A section of the therapists wanted a guarantee from the mayor that no hours would be made up. This was challenging because we didn't have unity on this among the therapists, didn't have enough power to demand it, since we were under lockdown and couldn't protest nor threaten a strike, and the leader of the association of parents was waiting for an opportunity to come after us. There was a debate within the union but no position emerged that had a majority of supporters - someone was also leaking internal group discussions to the parents' association. Then the leader of the parents' association, along with a handful of parent-activists, wrote a letter demanding that the parents of the program should receive the money allocated for the kids since the parents of the children were burdened with even more work and responsibility since the lockdown and "children's money" shouldn't be "wasted" on the therapists who have no intention of making up these missed hours. Thankfully, she didn't have many supporters nor did her letter go very far, but the fact that she attempted multiple times to deter therapists from receiving salaries during a pandemic should be concerning.

While the parents association leader kept attacking as expected, the inability of therapists to agree on a course of action, the inability to meet in real life and being only reduced to communicating with each other over social media with very tenuous connections made it easy for the mayor and the centers to impose makeup work via online sessions without an organized intervention. The majority of therapists didn't agree on a position regarding online work. On the one hand, online work actually required more work per hour than in-person sessions and on the other hand, therapists were worried all the work they put in with kids would be void due to such a long time between sessions. In other words, the kids would regress, so even though online sessions were difficult and required more work, it was better than starting all over with kids that had made strides in development. As expected, the mayor felt the pressure reduce and though he did pay the therapists, it was staggered, and in later months, the amount paid depended on the hours made up.

The actions of the parent's associations leader, despite being reactionary, exposes the pressure that mothers, especially with special-needs children, feel in finding for themselves without societal support and to what lengths some will go to keep a meager government program, even when it denies subsistence to workers. The fact that social reproduction is either looked at as the responsibility of the family or undeserving of decent pay and stable working conditions plays a critical role in how the program is both structured and its scope and capacity. The accepted belief of neoliberal restructuring of the government's responsibility towards its citizens is articulated best by requests to decrease government expenditures, labor costs and use of subcontractors – most shockingly enshrined in the Georgian constitution where government social services are capped at 30% of the budget in the “Liberty Act” – is also behind the architecture of this social program.

This social program in design makes sure to deprive therapists of their legal rights by removing the government from the role of the employer and instead, placed a powerless subcontractor and thus pressuring them to further violate labor laws by institutionalizing wage theft and misclassification of workers. It also set up the parents and the therapists against each other in a zero-sum game. The more exploited the workers are, the more children will receive care, thus easing the burden off parents. Having a program like this gives the ruling party credit in the eyes of the public locally while donors, NGOs, and international and regional organizations applaud the progress of children with disabilities. All the while increasing the war on workers in Georgia and weakening the position of workers in being able to survive and fight for better working conditions.

Despite the limited gains, a therapist union was organized for the first time in this field due to the pandemic. Most therapists agree they would have been left without any wages during the pandemic if it wasn't for the organizing done by the union. The neoliberal funding scheme was challenged for the first time openly and in the media with most of the public support going to the therapists. The unchallenged moralism of the “children's money” slogan was finally challenged both internally in the union and in public – losing the ability to manipulate both the therapists and parents. Many NGOs working on disabilities questioned the actions of the parents' association leader within their organizations, and one publicly condemned their letter on social media. Therapists realized that more parents actually supported them than the self-anointed gatekeeper of the parents – the leader of the association. Despite the hostile anti-social design of the autism program in Georgia, most parents, therapists, and activists found common ground, signaling that these moments like the pandemic can break down even the most vicious attempts to divide the working class – between paid and unpaid work. This is only the beginning. As demonstrated, the current legal framework and policy scheme does not give much room for legal maneuvering.

Sopiko Japaridze

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P.S.

Note of the LeftEast editors: The present text is part of a series of publications and webinars on the topics of social reproduction, (women's) labour and migration in East-Central Europe and beyond. The video from the first webinar, where this text was first presented [can be seen here](#). The aim of the series is to raise awareness about struggles for labour, reproduction and migrant rights, as well as of the condition of women in society and how these have been impacted by the COVID-19

pandemic outbreak. The publications and webinars are coordinated in cooperation between the Bulgarian Left feminist collective [LevFem](#) and the platform [Transnational Social Strike](#), and sponsored by [Friedrich Ebert Stiftung – Bulgaria](#). Most of the participants in the series are part of the newly emergent network EAST (Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational), which unites activists and workers in/from East-Central Europe. For more information about the network you can contact us at [essentialstruggles gmail.com](mailto:essentialstruggles@gmail.com). Reposting articles from this series is allowed with the condition of referring to the original publication source.

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