

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6903>



France

When calls for solidarity mask the steady advance of unpaid work

- IV Online magazine - 2020 - IV550 - November 2020 -

Publication date: Thursday 12 November 2020

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On 16 March 2020, as France was about to put its population into lockdown, the Education Ministry posted a serious message on its website : “The exceptional nature of the health crisis spreading across our country calls for an exceptional level of commitment from each and every one of us”. A few days later, on 1 April, 250,000 French citizens had put themselves forward to join the newly created ‘civilian reserve’. The response to this appeal for a show of “goodwill” was not so much a reflection of the philosophy of a [“participatory society”](#), praised in speeches by the Head of State and the government, but above all a sense of urgency arising from the pandemic.

“I was the first to ask for help from everyone I knew,” admits Yasmina Kettal, a nurse at Delafontaine Hospital in the Paris suburb of Saint-Denis, and a member of the Sud union. “We took everything that was offered us. The students who came to help us, the associations who gave us what we needed to keep going, the masks and the visors made by the neighbourhood associations [...]. We were very afraid of not having the capacity to absorb the shock,” she recalls.

When Christie Bellay, a costume designer for the film industry who was laid off because of the epidemic, saw that Grenoble Hospital had asked its staff to sew their own masks, she didn’t hesitate. “For me, it was inconceivable to ask caregivers, who were already saving lives during the day, to make their own protection as well after they got home from work. I started sewing and giving the masks to caregivers at Tenon Hospital, near my home,” she says.

However, this general outpouring of solidarity hides a paradox, seen more clearly with hindsight : the shock of the pandemic has created the idea that working without being paid for one’s time or professional skills could be acceptable, upholding the notion of some forms of ‘free’ work in the name of solidarity, generosity and one’s duty as a citizen.

This ‘free’ work, called upon in response to the state of emergency, is far from exceptional, however. In a text entitled [Free Work and the War of Values](#), published on 5 June on the website of *La Vie des idées* (The Life of Ideas), the French sociologist Maud Simonet writes : “The ‘torrents of goodwill’ that rush forth during crises actually feed into long rivers that already flowed before and are unlikely to dry up afterwards.”

The researcher points out that the state has constantly had recourse to free, ‘valued’ work, throughout the 20th century and mainly in the United States, where the expression ‘call-to-service’ is used. This exists “not only in times of acute crisis, where it is simply more visible, more widespread and arguably more staged,” she writes. Whoever runs the government, leaders have regularly called on volunteers to resolve crisis situations : in the 1960s, President Lyndon B. Johnson had his Volunteers in Service to America programme to fight poverty ; in the 1990s, Bill Clinton created the AmeriCorps Environmental Education corps ; in the 2000s, George W. Bush promoted his neighbourhood patrols in the name of the ‘war on terror’, while Barack Obama launched the United We Serve programme, which focused on health and education.

Simonet explains how the call to volunteerism to American citizens was initially launched to maintain, among other things, New York’s parks, when the city declared bankruptcy in 1976. But this use of volunteering has never stopped since then, while the number of municipal employees fell from 7,000 on the eve of the 1976 crisis to 2,000 employees at the end of the 1990s.

France has a policy of encouraging ‘free’ work

Far from being typically Anglo-Saxon, these types of voluntary engagement programmes are also found in France. “This recourse to the involvement of citizens in public services has also been widely developed and institutionalised in France in recent years through political support for volunteering, the creation and funding of a “[civic service](#)” and its recent deployment in public services, or the establishment of a “civic reserve”(in the fight against Covid-19)”, says Simonet.

Over the last 30 years the number of permanent employment contracts (CDD) – the most protective form of employment – has fallen, while at the same time the number of so-called ‘atypical’ contracts has risen. [1] These include short-term, or temporary, contracts, but there is also a multitude of statuses, that are subsidised and by-pass common law, such as [“assisted contracts”](#) (which have taken various forms and been given various names over time), open jobs or non-salaried civic service or [“universal national service schemes”](#) which carry out “tasks in the general interest”.

Originally intended to help non-profit associations and organisations, which since the 1980s have had difficulty finding the resources to operate, these low cost forms of employment, for employers, have gradually spread to other sectors, and above all in local authorities and public services.

In 2016, Vincent Peillon, National Education Minister, mobilised 30,000 civic service volunteers to implement his reform of extracurricular activities, provided by local authorities to occupy children outside of school hours. For several years now, in the public *Pôle Emploi* agencies (job centres), young people in civic service have been helping users to use electronic terminals. Young people in civic service also help students with their homework, or accompany disabled students to school. In public health establishments in Paris, the *Assistance publique – Hôpitaux de Paris* (APHP), ‘blue vests’, also in the civic service, guide users through the hospital. These are all tasks previously performed by conventional salaried staff.

It is therefore not surprising to find that this exponential development of civic service tasks – carried out by people under 25, without prior skills, paid €538 per month – is inversely proportional to workforce reductions, non-replacements or non-hires in the public sector. And this is not without its consequences for the fragility of the organisations that use them.

While in the short term, volunteering made it possible to ‘hold out’ during the first phase of the health crisis, to continue to rely on it in the future, in face of the steady weakening of public service, would only worsen the crisis brought on by a second wave, be it a health or economic crisis. “Admittedly, this growing trend towards unpaid work is not the only aspect of these austerity policies and the ‘heist’ carried out over the last few decades in public services, but it is certainly a major element and one of the most difficult to challenge, since it is carried out in the name of positive moral values”, explains Simonet in her text.

Are these tasks gaining or losing value ?

The other means of legitimising the recourse to “free” work, aside from claiming urgent need, is labelling it civic participation. It is in the name of solidarity, of altruism, that these activities are sometimes denied the status of work, removing the value, including monetary value, this would give it. This denial comes from the institutions that do the mobilising, but also, sometimes, from the activists themselves. An activist from Saint-Denis, who distributed meals to

her neighbours throughout the crisis, rejected the idea that her gesture of solidarity could be brought into the sphere of commodification. In her eyes, this gesture would have lost all the value that she placed on it if she were paid.

Isn't it the unpaid nature of the work that makes it a militant gesture ? Sandrine Nicourd, a sociologist specialising in the work of associations, at the Institute of Political Sciences of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, explains : "We cannot equate the situation of a pensioner, who has an income to live on, or that of an employed person, who takes part in an association outside their working hours, with that of a young person who cannot find work, who does not have the right to social assistance and who goes to work for an association to receive the €500 that allow him or her to survive". This distinction between two types of volunteering is rooted in the history of the associative movements.

"Youth and people's education movements operated through volunteering. There was no financial compensation, but they were rewarded in terms of training, [transfer of] knowledge, skills, social networking. These movements have in this way given thousands of young people a political training [in the form of civic engagement]".

The professionalisation and dependence of associations on public subsidies has gradually changed the meaning of civic engagement. "The terms of the employment contract have changed. Today, we see associations that offer 'employment contracts', mimicking the employment relationship, without providing either financial reward or social protection. And very often, without a return in terms of supervision or training. I have often encountered, in the course of my research, 'civic services' left to their own devices. Nobody is supervising their work," continues Nicourd.

The civic engagement urged by the government, "which brings young people into the civic social order", no longer has the same meaning as that which formerly led, on the contrary, to participation in society in a critical role. "These new forms of engagement produce disengagement, and lead to a rejection of politics," says Nicourd.

To address the issue of 'free' work, Simonet had to venture into feminist literature. "The foremost unpaid job is domestic work. I realised that they [feminists] had already explored all the debates and questions posed by volunteering". These two kinds of 'non-work' work are overwhelmingly carried out by women. [2] When we deny domestic work the status of work, we often do so in the name of 'maternal' values, responsibilities and care. [3] And when we refuse to consider volunteering as work, we do so in the name of the positive values of commitment and dedication.

To make all this 'free' work visible, feminist statisticians have measured its value in time and in monetary value, which has raised several questions. The first is that of the boundaries of this work. Getting your child to fall asleep, giving them a bath, is that work ? You could ask the same question about volunteering : carrying your elderly neighbour's groceries up the stairs, is it work ? If we give a monetary value to 'free' work, does this necessarily mean that it should be remunerated on a par with this value ? And how should we measure it ? Isn't that bringing the market economy into our private lives ? None of these debates have been really resolved by the feminist movement, but they give us something to think about, and help provide arguments to those – particularly women - who have suffered from this trend towards unpaid work, during the pandemic crisis, but also before and after.

Resisting the trend towards unpaid work

The great visibility of 'free' work in recent months has also given rise to forms of resistance. Requisitioned nursing students ended up speaking out : "We are faced with talk of constraint, of guilt. Sometimes, we were not given masks on the pretext that we were students and that there was already not enough for the caregivers," says Vincent Optiz, a

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board member for the nursing students union, *Fédération nationale des étudiants en soins infirmiers* (FNESI). Some hospitals have tried to promote the mobilisation of students as an extension of their internship period, paid €0.80 to €1.40 per hour depending on their year of study. “We are not here to make up for the lack of staff. An internship has an educational purpose, and the supervision was not there,” continues the young trade unionist. In the absence of formal contracts, the FNESI put pressure on the regions, which finance the training, so that the bogus trainees are at least compensated for their work. Some regions have thus released compensation ranging from €500 to €1,500. But students who had the misfortune of going to work in a different region to that of their training institute could not get this money.

The most interesting rebellion against this ‘unpaid’ work and the one that attracted the most media coverage was undoubtedly that of the garment workers, as Christie Bellay testifies : “At the beginning, I sewed masks, telling myself that it would be a transitional arrangement, before the state took over. It didn’t turn out like that at all. Quickly, the use of our services became systematic”. Bellay decided she’d had enough the day she received a box with materials to make 600 masks, to return the following week – with nothing in return. In garment worker Facebook groups, the word began to spread.

“The pressure on us was very strong. A mayor went in person to a seamstress to tell her that if she did not do it, he would ensure that she had no more work in the village. Those who wanted to sell their masks, even at cost, were insulted on the networks on the grounds that they lacked solidarity,” she says.

Like feminists, these somewhat forced volunteers try to estimate the hours worked for free, and have worked out it is a total of two billion hours in two months. They have then applied words to describe their shared experiences: “exploitation”, “illegal work”, “unfair competition”. Since then, [they have sworn](#) that they will not let it happen again.

The health crisis, as we have seen, was an opportunity for many states to make thousands of citizens work for free, in good faith or bad. But, more problematically, it hid the need to overcome their own shortcomings, while disregarding many rules, as Professor Matt Baillie Smith pointed out in an article for *The Conversation*. [\[4\]](#) It was also an opportunity, however, to highlight the limits of crisis volunteering thanks to the criticism of a phenomenon that is usually not very visible.

Source [Equal Times](#).

PS:

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[\[1\]](#) See Ministry of Labour report 21 June 2018 [“CDD, CDI : comment évoluent les embauches et les ruptures depuis 25 ans ?”](#).

[\[2\]](#) *Equal Times*, 20 February 2019 [“The future of labour is female”](#).

[\[3\]](#) *Equal Times*, 24 June 2019 [“The rise of the ‘disobedient mother’: towards a feminist vision of motherhood”](#).

[\[4\]](#) *The Conversation*, 19 May 2020 [“Coronavirus volunteers aren’t just a source of free labour – don’t take advantage of them”](#).