

How does history suggest that work will change following the COVID-19 pandemic?

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Following a pandemic, workers historically have recognized the value of their labor and become unwilling to accept poor wages and working conditions, said Carol Symes, a history professor who specializes in medieval studies. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The COVID-19 pandemic made clear the enormity of inequalities in the

workplace and the value of essential workers, whose jobs put them at greater risk of being infected. Many workers left their jobs as part of the Great Resignation. Others are unwilling to give up the flexibility of working from home. Starbucks and Amazon workers voted to unionize. Carol Symes, a professor of history who specializes in medieval studies, said the Black Death plague of the mid-1300s led to workers realizing the value of their labor and protesting poor working conditions. She spoke with News Bureau arts and humanities editor Jodi Heckel about changes in the labor market that have historically followed a pandemic.

How did the Black Death affect attitudes at the time toward labor, and how did laborers, the elite and governments respond?

The pandemic we know as the Black Death resulted in massive population losses: between 40% and 60% of the people living in Afro-Eurasia—and possibly more in some regions, as well as in others from which we don't yet have archeological or ancient DNA evidence. Historians and our allies in other fields, notably epidemiology and bioarcheology, are still debating the scale of mortality. Meanwhile, since the sequencing of the *Yersinia pestis* genome in 2013, evidence is mounting that this bacterium was causing outbreaks of plague in Central and East Asia over a century before it manifested itself in western Asia, Africa and Europe in the 1340s.

The people who lived through this medieval pandemic were immediately aware of its effects on the workforce. For example, the English Parliament passed a law called the Statute of Laborers in 1351, in an effort to keep [agricultural workers](#) and craftspeople from moving around the country in search of better-paying jobs. The fact that Parliament kept reissuing this law for years, during and after the pandemic, shows that it didn't have any effect: Workers had become keenly aware that their

skills were valuable, and they refused to accept the poor wages and working conditions—often amounting to enforced or enslaved labor—that were traditionally expected of them.

Were there essential workers who were more at risk of illness and death during the Black Death, as there were with the COVID-19 pandemic?

Then, as now, the people who kept everyone else fed, and who cared for the sick and dying, were at greatly increased risk of contracting the disease. Elites could barricade themselves in their houses or flee to the countryside, but servants and other working-class people could not avoid contact with one another and with the many kinds of animal hosts that carried the disease: dogs, horses, cattle, camels. There are many firsthand accounts of priests and physicians either refusing to visit the sick and dying, or heroically putting themselves at risk to help others.

Do you see parallels between changes following the Black Death and events now, in terms of people leaving the workforce, unionization efforts and workers deciding they want more flexibility to work from home?

As the English example shows, workers were very quick to understand the potential for leveraging their positions through individual and collective action. And in the decades immediately following the pandemic, there were numerous strikes and rebellions all over Europe—not only in response to labor shortages, but in protest against unjust taxation and longstanding socioeconomic inequities. While most urban and rural rebellions were savagely put down by rulers and local elites, some of the demands that workers made had to be met, at least in

the short term.

Obviously, the flexibility of working from home has been possible during our [pandemic](#) because of the internet and new online networking tools and meeting platforms like Zoom. There's no analogy to that in medieval history, or before the 20th century, for that matter! Yet there is a sense in which many people were able to work from home in new ways, or to find new homes entirely.

Hundreds, if not thousands, of towns and villages disappeared as a result of depopulation, meaning that many people had to become geographically mobile—and geographical mobility often leads to social mobility. Others, particularly in [rural areas](#), could annex and farm lands that were abandoned and lying fallow, and which were more productive as a result. In fact, for the people who survived, the standards of living and nutrition after the Black Death were far higher than before, and sometimes better than they are now.

Were there long-term changes in labor because of the Black Death?

While medieval governments cracked down on labor movements, they couldn't eradicate the growing sense among the working classes in some regions that they deserved better. But in other regions, the response from elites was to quell dissent, or even calls for reform, by tightening the hold on workers through indentured servitude, serfdom or increasing reliance on enslaved [labor](#).

What do you hope people take from our experience with the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of understanding past experiences?

The rallying cry among English laborers after the Black Death was "When Adam delved and Eve span, who then was a gentleman?" In other words, when Adam and Eve were forced from Eden and had to earn their living, by digging and spinning, they showed that we are all equal: We are all mortal; no one is naturally more deserving or privileged than anyone else; everyone is deserving of respect and a livelihood. At the same time, we are all mutually dependent and responsible for one another. I hope we all can remember that, with humility and gratitude.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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