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# Essential workers during covid-19: how quickly we forget

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There were many heroes during the covid-19 pandemic. Not only did the majority not wear capes, they also did not wear scrubs. We need to celebrate those who kept us fed, watered, supplied, and safe. They were the very definition of “essential workers”: every bit as much as us healthcare workers. As such, there was distress to hear that several staff from a hospital’s food services have been “let go” because their services were “contracted out.”

In dispassionate economic terms it probably makes sense. Hospitals can focus on healthcare delivery, and there are theoretical savings for customers and coffers. But without these staff, we categorically would not have made it through the greatest healthcare crisis of the last half century: essential then. Essential now?

We rely on readily available food, but nowadays, the hospital—and society in general—marches on its coffee. Our hospital coffee line is the closest we have to a “third place.”<sup>1</sup> The queue is where we connect and de-stress. It is where ideas start, disagreements are resolved, and tension is released. Coffee is how the weary are thanked for nightshifts, and everyone energises for the day. If the emergency department is the heart of the hospital, then the coffee shop is its soul.

Moreover, if you think outsourcing could never happen to you then think again. Salaries are the lowest hanging fruit in almost all industries, including high-tech healthcare, and artificial intelligence is already threatening many previously untouchable jobs. Hyperbole aside, labour groups often reference the 1930s German Pastor, Martin Niemöller and use his quote that begins: “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a socialist.”<sup>2</sup> After listing other groups for whom he did not advocate, they finally came for him, but no one was left to speak out. With the risk of causing eyes to roll...first they came for our coffee servers, eventually it could be you.

Even if the above comparison is extreme, most would agree that the post covid work world is uncertain and nerve-racking. Many with means have quit—the so called great resignation<sup>3</sup>—while many others are trapped in jobs with little advancement and minimal benefits. The post pandemic world has already created two workplace terms that sum this up: “quiet quitting,” where people turn up, but no longer feel valued, and “quiet firing” where workplace conditions are so bad that workers are desperate to leave.

We may not be able to save jobs, but let’s at least save workers. This is because employment gives many lives meaning, and many communities their cohesion. Work is good for our collective health. What’s more, many key areas—such as food security, trucking, and

nursing homes—are already perilously short, and the great resignation could become society’s great regret. For example, in my privileged country and profession, one-in-six Canadians is already without a family doctor, there are over 100 000 nursing vacancies, and surgeries are routinely cancelled because of no anaesthetist.

The pandemic could have changed who and what we value. Instead, it seems we all just wanted to forget. We should have learnt that society ticks or tanks based on whether we look after each other. We should have learnt to thank those that clean floors, serve coffee, drive buses, and bring supplies. Essential workers never wanted gushing praise during covid, and don’t deserve to be cast aside now. In other words, let’s not bang pots; let’s look after those who do society’s heavy lifting. After all, none of us is truly irreplaceable.

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- 1 Radio CBC. Searching for a connection in third places may be the solution. <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/searching-for-connection-third-places-may-be-the-solution-1.6680662>
- 2 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>
- 3 *The Daily Telegraph*. Great Resignation becomes Great Regret as workers long for their pre-Covid jobs <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2023/04/04/workers-miss-their-pre-covid-jobs-as-great-resignation-beckons>