

# 05 Care Revolution



## Fighting for Care Work Resources

### About the authors and their positions

We are writing as activists in the *Care Revolution network*, which we have been involved in since 2014, including as members of the Freiburg regional group. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors. Gabriele Winker is the author of the book *Care Revolution. Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft* ('*Care Revolution. Steps towards a society based on solidarity*') and is Professor of Sociology of Work and Gender Studies at the Hamburg University of Technology. Matthias Neumann is a supermarket employee and political scientist.

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**Release date:**  
13.12.2016

[www.degrowth.de/en/dim](http://www.degrowth.de/en/dim)

### 1. What is the key idea of Care Revolution?

#### Care Revolution wants to shape care and self-care according to needs with a fundamental change in societal direction

Care Revolution activists are working for a good life in which all people's needs can be met in full without excluding anyone or exploiting others. Building on insights from feminist politics, Care Revolution puts the fundamental significance of care work at the core of its social critical analysis and political action. From birth, people are dependent on the care of others, without which they could not survive. Beyond childhood and youth, and times of sickness and frailty, people are also dependent on others in their everyday lives. The possibility of getting help and support in a difficult situation is an important criterion for a good life. This also applies to the possibility of being able to care for others without having to be disproportionately disadvantaged.

Care work is an activity that all people carry out. They care for themselves, for their health, for their education, they cook for themselves or for other people, bring up children, advise friends, and care for relatives who need support. Some care work is paid, for example that carried out by carers or nursery school teachers. Most of this work however is done within families by women and is unpaid; often it is not considered to be work at all.

Currently, more and more people face the increasingly difficult task of mastering the balancing act between employment and unpaid care work for themselves and others. They live with the constant threat of failing to meet demands. In their employment, they are confronted with increasing demands on flexibility from the company, continually rising performance pressure, as well as salaries, which are often too low compared to the cost of living. According to the neoliberal credo of individual responsibility, each individual is required to combine high professional requirements with increasing self-organisation tasks and the growing demands of familial care work.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that, in order to reduce costs, many state welfare services, for example in the health or education system, are be-

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ing cut rather than expanded. It is primarily many women who suffer in this deficient state infrastructure as they carry out most of the socially necessary care work in the home alongside their paid employment. In high-earning families, part of this work is passed on to poorly paid migrant domestic workers who do not have social security. In this way, high earners solve their problems on the backs of those for whom even this precarious work means an improvement to their catastrophic position. State tolerance of these working conditions in private households, which fall below societal minimum standards, is aggravating a global division of labour that ignores the basic needs of care workers from countries in Eastern Europe and the global south.

#### *Care Revolution as a political strategy*

The obvious response that meets needs is to organise and carry out the work needed in families and institutions together and without discrimination. For those in the Care Revolution network, attending to people's needs, space for empathy and solidarity, as well as genuine democracy in politics and the economy are essential. With the following steps, it is possible to come closer to the aim of good care and a good life:

- Sufficient income for all in order to secure a sustainable livelihood: This primarily means a substantial minimum wage without exceptions, an unconditional basic income and a significant improvement in pay for work in care careers.
- Sufficient time to be able to care for one's close ones and oneself alongside paid employment, and maintain time for leisure. This primarily means a considerable reduction in working hours for full-time workers, special arrangements for people with a lot of care responsibilities, and a non-discriminatory division of care work between men and women.
- A social infrastructure that truly supports care and self-care: This primarily means an expanded and free education and health system, affordable accommodation, free local public transport and support for self-help networks and commons projects. This can be realised by redistributing societal wealth.
- Real involvement in societal decision-making: This means comprehensive self-governance, starting in the care sector. This can be effected via a council system that enables national coordination and democratic control. Many care projects, such as health centres, nurseries or educational establishments can also be organised decentrally with local self-governance in districts or neighbourhoods.
- Non-discriminatory society: This means that there is no exclusion, no discrimination and no privileges owing to one's ethnic origin, na-

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tionality, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability or occupational skills.

Care Revolution's aim is a society based on solidarity. Those in the Care Revolution network understand this to be a radically democratic society, oriented towards human needs and, in particular, towards caring for one another. In a society based on solidarity, the needs of all people in their diversity are met, without people from other global regions being discriminated against. Correspondingly, Care Revolution means that it is no longer profit maximisation but human needs that are the focus of social, and thus also economic action.

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## 2. Who is part of Care Revolution, what do they do?

### **Care Revolution network actors call for more time and resources for paid and unpaid care work**

In the *Care Revolution network*, there are initiatives from different areas of society and with different political priorities. These include organisations of caregiving relatives, disability groups, parent groups, migrant groups, *ver.di* and *GEW trade union* site groups in the field of care and childcare, social movement organisations, queer feminist groups and radical left-wing groups. In March 2014, sixty such initiatives came together in Berlin for the first time to prepare and hold a conference, which 500 people attended. Shortly after this, these and other initiatives founded the [Care Revolution network](#). Currently, the network is limited to Germany, Switzerland and Austria.

#### *Examples of groups represented in the network*

A significant proportion of the initiatives represented by Care Revolution come from a feminist or queer feminist background. Some have fought since the 1970s, as part of the second wave of feminism, for a revaluation of unpaid reproductive work. Today, older and younger activists in the Care Revolution network again want to comprehend the feminist agenda as a more general form of social criticism, including through their struggles for improved care resources. Here, priorities are quite varied. Some highlight the gender gap in care work and demand recognition of this socially necessary work. Others are active in groups that combine anti-capitalist and feminist positions and discuss their own life circumstances in relation to structural crises. The latter involved Care Revolution in the Blockupy protests.

*Women in Exile*, which also participated in the first *Care Revolution conference*, calls for refugees to be housed in apartments rather than in camps where there is no privacy or protection against attacks. The initiative is demanding this for women and children as a matter of urgency but also calls for all camps to be dissolved. The initiative combines its public relations

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activities for this aim with informing refugees about their rights, and positions against racism and the migration regime.

In recent years, labour disputes regarding paid care work have made the headlines. These disputes have been innovative in various ways. For example, the *ver.di* site group and the staff council at Charité – Universitätsmedizin Berlin demanded a collective agreement regarding minimum employee coverage from the company that operates Berlin’s university hospitals. This labour dispute was supported by the association *Berlinerinnen und Berliner für mehr Personal im Krankenhaus* (‘Berlin residents for more hospital staff’) with actions to demonstrate solidarity; it did this explicitly in the interests of potential patients. On 1 May 2016, this collective agreement was achieved after over four years of disputes. A second example are the disputes in German municipal nurseries. In the 2015 strikes, there were calls for a societal revaluation of care work in nurseries and social services, as well as an increase in pay to reflect this. There were increased and partially successful efforts to gain parents as allies for this cause.

There are also labour-managed companies that support Care Revolution’s ideas. One example are the carers at *Lossetal care centre*, which is a working part of the *Niederkaufungen commune*. Other members of the commune, neighbours and relatives are involved as much as possible in the care facilities for care-dependent individuals and people with dementia in particular. This should improve quality of care. It is also an expression of the social objective that people in neighbourhoods should provide each other with mutual support. The care centre complements this with the required professional input.

In familial care work, the initiative *Armut durch Pflege* (‘Poverty through care’) can be mentioned. This initiative created the association *Wir pflegen – Interessenvertretung begleitender Angehöriger und Freunde in Deutschland* (‘we care – interest representation for accompanying relatives and friends in Germany’). The aim of the initiative is to give a voice to those affected by difficult situations and their demands, and to bring about material improvements for relatives who are carers, for example, through a substantial care allowance. As such, the association’s demands also relate to the human dignity of the people being cared for, which should not be dependent on their ability to pay. The organisation *Nicos Farm* pursues the same aims by different means: Children and young people who are dependent on lifelong care owing to a disability should also be able to have a dignified life if their parents themselves are in need of care or are deceased. The organisation aims to implement a project involving accommodation, employment opportunities and therapy at Lüneburger Heide in Germany.

#### *Framework conditions for joint action*

The *Care Revolution conference* in March 2014 was a moment where mutual interest, as well as the different needs and difficult situations were as evid-

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ent as the desire for a joint explanation regarding the social suffering experienced. At the conference, the widespread weakness in the implementation of the individual initiatives became evident, as did the reasons for this: because no economic pressure can be established in that kind of care work, because the work is frequently carried out by isolated individuals, and because, in neoliberal discourse, completing care tasks is the responsibility of the individual. Above all, the conference underlined a desire to address these issues through joint action.

Cooperation between the different initiatives is not easy: There are real, varied struggles and alternative projects on care work. There is recognition of the similarities between them and the desire to support one another. However, individual, often existential battles are necessarily at the heart of the initiatives' work. Activists' lack of flexibility due to care responsibilities, precarious living conditions, and lack of time and money further impede joint action. Additionally, there is still a lack of experience of joint action actually resulting in more success. All of this is currently preventing Care Revolution from gaining more of a public presence.

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### 3. How do you see the relationship between Care Revolution and Degrowth?

#### Care Revolution and degrowth can fight for a society based on solidarity together

In terms of content, we see an important link between Care Revolution and degrowth in the fact that both concepts relate to prospects for a good life. This also applies, as far as we can judge, to the other movements that are represented by and brought together under the *Degrowth in Movement(s)* banner.

At first glance, there appears to be a fundamental contradiction in that degrowth places emphasis on 'less': It is about combining less use of resources with a good life for all where everyone's needs are met. In this scenario, a necessary decrease in economic growth should not be a threat to standards of living but rather represent an opportunity. In contrast, Care Revolution is ultimately seeking more: More time, a more supportive social infrastructure and more material security are unavoidable prerequisites for an improvement in the position of care workers. For the health, care, education and childcare sectors, it is also about more employees and higher wages.

It gets politically interesting when these two aims are combined: less use of resources by society and more care resources. Then this is about reducing all areas that are destructive to humans and the ecological foundations of human life. Examples include armaments manufacturing, coal power stations or the current structure of individual transport. At the same time, it is about

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growing specific areas that are necessary for self-care and care for one another and creating the conditions for this. It is about developing concepts for how a reduction in soil sealing can be combined with an expansion of nurseries, how a reduction in the consumption of consumer goods can be combined with more material security and support for relatives who are carers, how more employees in healthcare and education can be combined with a societal reduction in working hours. In general, it means thinking about how a society can be structured to meet people's care needs and preserve the ecological foundations for human life at the same time.

We believe that bringing together degrowth and Care Revolution is worthwhile because of the parallels between the two concepts. Both make one uncompromising demand of a desirable society: It must make a good life possible for all people globally and for subsequent generations. This premise brings with it the idea that a society that cannot guarantee this should be changed. Against this backdrop, degrowth and Care Revolution can meet precisely where they both place a pointed emphasis on anti-capitalism. For the degrowth approach, there is the central idea that an increase in the efficiency of energy and resource usage is not enough to sufficiently reduce consumption. Not only must production processes change but the production scope and the way one uses consumer goods must too. Mobility, access to washing machines, tools or libraries, as well as the use of gardens will have to be much more collectively managed in order to enable access for all. If successful, such a transformed economy would not mean a sacrifice, but would mean having other, richer social relations. This equally positive reference to the interdependence of human beings is very similar to Care Revolution's thinking on care and care work. To be dependent on one another is a fundamental part of human life. As such, it is also immensely important to focus on human collaboration and solidarity in political actions and in the development of societal alternatives.

A joint effort with other movements is an especially attractive notion, as is fighting together. Both Care Revolution and degrowth can identify with the topic of 'a society based on solidarity, a life based on solidarity', which touches on the need for changes in societal institutions as well as changes in one's own lifestyle. Both analyse the destruction of the human being as a social being and ecosystems in capitalism and contrast this with the principles of a society based on solidarity. As such, both are anti-capitalist projects at their core. If this is true, then both movements also pose questions about social transformation: How do individual struggles, experiments and political changes intensify to the point that an alternative to capitalism, based on solidarity, becomes reality? We consider the search for transformation strategies to be part of a joint project for needs-oriented social movements.

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#### 4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

**Care Revolution's strength is that very heterogeneous initiatives are calling for comprehensive social changes together**

One strength of the initiatives under the Care Revolution banner is their heterogeneity, as the topic of care speaks directly to people from different backgrounds with different political ideas, life concepts and desires. At the first conference in March 2014, it was impressive to see how this diversity was combined with mutual respect and curiosity.

We believe this relates to the fact that care has reference points in all social and political settings. Care addresses vital needs, which underlines the absurdity of wanting to treat, teach, advise or care for people according to the principle of maximum profit. People with different life experiences and different life situations are coming to the conclusion that society must be entirely redesigned, at least with regard to care. It is relatively easy to imagine alternatives in care as the necessary social infrastructure can largely be realised decentrally, in local districts or villages.

Nurseries, healthcare establishments and social centres can be organised with forms of direct democracy. All those directly affected by negotiations regarding care institutions can be involved. This is primarily possible because care workers of different kinds are meeting on a level playing field: both those for whom care is a career, and those who are involved in care within families or self-care. They can meet each other as experts who are pursuing the same aim of organising care well with different skills and interests. Experiences in the care sector and in struggles for better care conditions can also make comprehensive socialisation, which goes beyond the care sector, appear more realistic and more desirable. Freeing all areas of production and how we live together from the framework of valorisation and market competition is also a condition for protecting the ecological foundations of life.

With regard to commons projects, we believe Care Revolution activists can learn a lot from movement approaches such as those who participate within the *Degrowth in Movement(s)* project. Unlike in the care sector where initial efforts are being made, there are already multiple projects there, where people are jointly developing and living out part of a more liveable future on a small scale. We are thinking here of community repairs, fab labs (public workshops equipped with 3D printers), communal gardens or the many projects in community-supported agriculture.

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#### 5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

**Needs-oriented movements can develop a liveable alternative to capitalism**

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#### **together where they combine their alternative projects and transformation strategies**

The different movements and practices under the *Degrowth in Movement(s)* banner have certain features in common: The centrality of human needs, attentiveness to life in general, the importance of real social relationships and fair social framework conditions make up a shared core, with quite different emphases. From this core, the consequences of capitalist development, which destroy the ecosystem as much as human beings as social creatures, may be criticised. Projects promoting a life based on solidarity can be brought together in discussion and in practice. Individual efforts can be linked and societal alternatives developed.

Strengthening these links to one another is perhaps what is most urgent. This involves the different movements developing a liveable alternative to capitalism through exchanging ideas. It is also about them finding a shared focus in their projects and in their solidarity-based lifestyle. If this is successful, the movements can achieve something together that each individual cannot.

Partial movements also have something to contribute. For example, if migrants are caring for people at home in miserable working conditions, this creates an opportunity for a needs-oriented movement based on solidarity with different reference points: the right of the person requiring care to be well cared for, the right of the relatives to not be solely responsible for care, the rights of the migrant carers to good working conditions and good pay, the rights of the migrants' children or relatives and the people in their home countries who care for them. It is necessary to account for all these justified demands, which affect the care system here, as well as the unfair distribution of work globally. If movements focusing on migration, care or the global division of labour work closely together, they can support each other with a comprehensive overview of the situation.

Redesigning towns and villages based on solidarity also requires joint action. Organising a collective social infrastructure in districts entails removing the care sector from valorisation. Communal gardens require free access to land. Experiments in co-living, shared repair workshops, community kitchens or polyclinics should not be restricted or impeded by the fact that their rental payments have to generate sufficient returns. Reducing private car use requires a correspondingly developed local transport network and thoughts on how urban sprawl and the spatial separation of life and work can be addressed. By bringing together the many individual projects, a new, more strongly contoured image of liveable towns could emerge; discussing necessary conditions should enable us to determine more clearly how a societal alternative could function. By the very different activists from different individual movements meeting and becoming politically active together, they can support each other in thinking of and practising alternatives



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without old and new exclusions.

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### Links and Literature

#### Links

Interview with Gabriele Winker on the book 'Care Revolution. Schritte in eine solidarische Gesellschaft' (in German):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbVlSxAT5fM>

Care Revolution homepage: <http://www.care-revolution.org>

Care Revolution's partners (including all groups and initiatives mentioned in the text): <http://www.care-revolution.org/gruppen/>

Care Revolution regional groups: <http://www.care-revolution.org/regionale-ernetzungen/>

'Her mit dem guten Leben für alle weltweit! Für eine Care Revolution' (information on the Care Revolution conference in Berlin in 2014, in German): <https://vimeo.com/92904959>

Video documentation of Care Revolution actionconference in Berlin in 2014: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3k\\_kjLqVCU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C3k_kjLqVCU)

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