



The challenges of the social worker's work in times of the Covid-19 pandemic and neoconservatism in Brazil

Os desafios do trabalho do assistente social em tempos de pandemia de Covid-19 e neoconservadorismo no Brasil

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to understand the perception, performance and demands placed on social services in the health area during the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of political neoconservatism in the country. The method used was bibliographic research in scientific articles published in the area of social work. The results reinforce the importance of analyzing the challenges posed to social work in the neoconservative political reality in the pandemic period, studying in more depth this unique historical moment and the impacts experienced in the profession. We consider that the production of this research will raise fundamental contributions to the profession with important reflections for the professional practice of the social worker.

Keywords: Social work, Neoconservatism, Pandemic.

1 INTRODUCTION

The counter-reforms of the State, the cuts in the budget of social policies, the constant loss of rights in the field of labor with its total precariousness of working conditions and relations, the growth of conservatism with fascist traits, were some of the ongoing challenges when we were hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. Within the framework of neoliberalism, the health crisis did not originate, but gave visibility to, the poverty and inequalities caused by the capitalist productive forces that have generated changes in the economy, politics, education, and culture of society.

The counter-reforms in the field of work and social policies directly affect Social Work as a profession and resize the performance of social workers, as the professional response is "based on ongoing social processes".



An analysis by Yazbek *et al* (2019, p.7-8) points out that conservative and reactionary thinking has advanced in our country, questioning basic values of the democratic rule of law and building a new policy with an emphasis on the market, thus shaping a unique profile for the social issue and inequality. And in addition, the victory of the far-right candidate in the 2018 presidential elections highlighted a process of radicalization of national politics unprecedented since the beginning of the New Republic, further enhancing a deep political, economic and social crisis, marked by high unemployment, precariousness and informalization of labor relations, impoverishment of the population and drastic reduction of resources allocated to social policies.

The country, which was already in an escalation of its deepest contradictions, resulting from the crisis of capital, sees its reality aggravated and expressed in the precarious bonds of work, unemployment and lack of labor protection in the labor market. Even though we understand that the advance of ultra-right and fascist groups is a worldwide phenomenon, it is important to analyze the Brazilian particularities that sustain the so-called neoconservatism combined with a process of radicalization of neoliberalism in the sphere of the economy. (Yazbek, *et al.*, 2021, p. 6).

In such a complex context, the pandemic emerges, combining increasing levels of human and environmental exploitation and degradation, as analyzed by Raichelis and Arregui (2021).

It is in this universe of loss of rights and conservatives that the study has its bases, with the social worker facing in his daily life the challenges of the profession in its socio-occupational spaces, the changes in work relations and bonds, the cuts in resources, the disarticulation of the mechanisms of participation and social control and above all, the much-needed reinvention of professional performance imposed by the pandemic.

The interest in this research object came with the realization of the importance of analyzing the challenges posed to social workers in a neoconservative and pandemic political reality. Studying this historical moment more deeply and the impacts experienced by Social Work professionals means producing a relevant study that will certainly bring solid contributions to the profession.

However, the study aims to understand the perception and performance of social work in health during the Covid-19 pandemic in the context of political neoconservatism, analyzing the commitment of social workers in the face of precarious work, identifying tensions, challenges and responses, thus understanding the new demands placed on daily professional life. We conducted bibliography research based on scientific articles in the area of social work published by the journal *Social Service & Society*.



The study proposes to problematize the following questions: how did the social worker face the pandemic moment in a neoconservative political reality? How purposeful was your performance in such an adverse context?

2 THE NEOCONSERVATIVE WAVE AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE PROFESSION

In Brazil, in addition to the health crisis of extreme complexity and severity, associated with the capitalist crisis, we had to face a health policy under the management of a denialist, proto-fascist, conservative and ultra-liberal government.

Especially since the second decade of the 2000s, Brazil has been suffering a political and ideological crisis with a series of dismantling in the field of social rights at an accelerated pace since the *impeachment* of former President Dilma Rousseff in 2016. The government of former President Michel Temer (2016-2018) extinguished important ministries such as the Ministry of Culture, Women, and Racial Equality, which represented important achievements for the Brazilian people. In addition, he promoted a series of reforms and fiscal adjustments, with cuts in the budget of the Unified Social Assistance and Health System, scrapping public services, and a reform in the severe labor legislation, with great losses, for the worker.

The labor reform that took place in Brazil in 2017 brought significant changes to the Brazilian worker. The reform proposed by then-President Michel Temer (2016-2018), according to his speech, was a necessary economic measure to combat unemployment. However, the reform instrumentalized by Law No. 13,467 of 2017 was actually a blow against the Brazilian worker.

"The reform expands the freedom of employers to determine the conditions of hiring, the use of labor power and the remuneration of workers. In other words, it seeks to impute the process of defining the rules of the employment relationship to the companies, restricting the participation of workers' organizations and the State. This process leads, firstly, to an increase in workers' insecurity and the loss of rights, as well as a decrease in social protection. The reform also seeks to empty the trade union organizations as class organizations, since the vision of more decentralized organizations and articulated with the interests of companies now prevails" (KREIN, 2018).

Law No. 13,467/2017 of Michel Temer (PMDB), which amends 201 points in the CLT (KREIN, 2018), was criticized by the most left-wing in the country and supported by the business community. It intensifies the loss of workers' rights, dismantles the workers' organization and weakens their unions, precarious and weakens labor bonds, increasing the insecurity of the worker, and it does so through the legal apparatus of the State, which is subservient to the orders of capital. The labor reform in question adjusts the role of the State and regulates labor relations to the demands of contemporary capitalism, which in turn relegates to *work the* meaning of mere



production of values, increasingly emphasizing the importance of the commodity in the generation of superprofits that overlaps with the importance of life in capitalist society.

The government of former President Jair Messias Bolsonaro (2019-2022) focused its efforts on establishing an authoritarian, religious, and anti-PT government. In his government plan entitled "The Path to Prosperity", which bore the motto: "Brazil above all and God above all", he showed his attempt to establish a religious state. Its main lines of action were: security and the fight against corruption, focusing efforts on arming the population; in the areas of health and education, it encouraged the outsourcing and privatization of services; In the economy, the high prices of the basic food basket, high inflation and high interest rates, and unemployment have led to an even greater impoverishment of the majority of Brazilians.

The federal government, through the Ministry of Health, engendered a true process of disarticulation and technical destructuring of the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing decisively to the death of more than 700 thousand Brazilians. At the same time, and dialectically, it is in this scenario that the destructive rationality of contemporary sociability becomes evident, which also makes the need for the SUS and the relevance of the health reform project expressive. Social workers from all over the country were part of the task force of health workers who fight bravely for the health care of the population in the midst of the contradictions of an extremely precarious policy. Unfunded, privatised, instrumentalised in the service of the interests of the private health market (Soares et al., 2021, p. 130).

The expansion of the right(s) on the national and international scene, the growth of conservatism with fascist traits, and the intense precariousness of working and living conditions are concrete expressions of the current phase of accumulation of international capitalism, which cannot be credited to the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus (Yazbek et al., 2020, p. 207).

The centrality of financial capital and its dominance over productive capital has serious consequences for the "class that lives from work" (Antunes, 2013 *apud* Yazbek et al., 2020, p. 208), with the maintenance of high rates of unemployment, job insecurity and instability, growth of informal and precarious work, reduction of wages, precariousness of labor relations, including outsourcing and fixed-term contracts, harassment, suffering and illness, among other aspects. As we know, the inequality and concentration of income, which are intensified in the current forms of capitalist accumulation, result from changes in the sphere of production, associated with the new liberal-financial hegemony, and bring as a consequence the aggravation of the "social question" and its expressions in the life of the working class. In Brazil, we are facing an "unequal society without remission", as Francisco de Oliveira (2003, p. 146 *apud* Yazbek et al., 2020, p.



208) reminds us, which at the present time radicalizes the "social question" and expands strategies of subordination, reconfiguring forms and meanings of public policies and social protection systems (Yazbek et al., 2020, p. 208).

If the professional commitment is to overcoming exploitation and oppression, the analysis that recovers and densifies its societal determinants is a fundamental instrument to seek alternatives that put the commitment to life and the rights of social individuals in the first place. In times of dismantling of fragile and insufficient public policies, this is a picture that deeply challenges those who seek another sociability beyond capital (Yazbek et al., 2020, p. 212).

3 THE WORK OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMIC

As has already been noted, the new coronavirus pandemic is not responsible for the emergence of the contemporary crisis, but it has certainly exacerbated the most perverse features of a social crisis of great proportions, making processes that were already in development more tangible and more visible. The health crisis laid bare the way in which capitalism had been responding to its crises for about five decades, since the 1970s, as a strategy of capital to reverse the trend in profit rates, in a structural movement of overproduction and underconsumption. We know that crises in capitalism are not occasional phenomena, but constitutive of the socio-metabolic movement of capital. In this process, capital incorporates technological and scientific innovations and advances, especially digital-based technologies, which accelerate labor productivity, provoke the economy of living labor, and expand the surplus population for the average needs of capital valorization, expanding and diversifying relative overpopulation (Marx, 1968 and 1975 *apud* Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.139), a dynamic that deepens unemployment rates and job insecurity on a global scale (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.139).

In these terms, the precariousness of work is not an inevitability, as many would have us believe, but a strategy of the capitalist accumulation pattern in times of neoliberal globalization, both in the center and in the periphery. It is a powerful mechanism for the reorganization of work in the context of capitalism hegemonized by finance, which combines flexibilization, outsourcing, and informality of work "as inseparable parts of the lexicon and pragmatics of the global corporate enterprise" (Antunes, 2020b, p. 11 *apud* Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.139). Even though the precariousness of work is an inherent requirement of capitalism, its processuality has been transformed historically, assuming in capitalist contemporaneity traces of a permanent movement of losses, social regression, offensive against workers, super-exploitation of the workforce worldwide, with harmful expressions in the dependent periphery. Therefore, "the social



precariousness of work is a new and an old phenomenon, because it is different and the same, because it is past and present, and because it is a macro and microsocial phenomenon" (Druck, 2011, p. 35 *apud* Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.139-140).

The pandemic occurs at a juncture in which we already had a cumulative and alarming picture of informality, unemployment, and lack of labor protection in the Brazilian labor market, aggravated in the context of "pandemic capitalism" or "toxic and viral capitalism" (Antunes, 2020a *apud* Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.140).

The pandemic situation exposes the contradictory dimensions of this process very crudely: on the one hand, the failure of the ultra-neoliberal measures that defunded social policies, especially SUS and Suas, the most requested social protection systems in the context of the pandemic. And, at the same time, the need for more State and the strengthening of public policies to face this crisis (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 143).

The professional experience of Social Work in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic was something never seen before. An experience never lived before. The reality of the pandemic period brought unprecedented and challenging concepts, conducts and methods to the professional day-to-day. The social worker had to learn new ways of providing care, approaching and understanding professional practice. It was a moment of readjustment of the professional universe in a reality that was harshly imposed. Words such as *homecare*, social isolation, distancing, quarantine, PPE, PCR have become part of the vocabulary used daily in professional practice.

The social worker, as well as so many other health professionals, had their routines transformed in an overwhelming way. The workload, which in most cases was 8 hours a day, became shifts of 12 and even 24 hours. Humanized care, defended by the social worker, became objective, distanced and without the possibility of even the slightest touch.

The pandemic made the action of health professionals become capsulated by so many masks, gloves, caps, aprons, face shields, not to mention the countless times it was necessary to wash hands and use 70% alcohol. We develop manias, neuroses, anxieties. Remembering this period is very painful. The marks left by the pandemic will remain in our memory forever. The deaths of family members, friends, co-workers and so many patients will be eternalized in our lives. It was a period we don't want to live through ever again!

The metamorphoses in the "world" of work affect the Social Work labor market and the professional practice of social workers and other professionals, in a contextualization of degradation of work and precariousness of the conditions in which it is exercised, impacting not only the material conditions of the subjects who live from work, but also their individual and



collective sociabilities. whereas also the erosion of public social protection systems, a privileged institutional place where social workers operate (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 143).

The point to be highlighted is that this new-old morphology of work has repercussions and reconfigures the social work of different professional categories, including social workers, who have their broadest insertion in public policies. The pandemic situation brought new elements to those we had been discussing (Raichelis, 2018, 2019), reaching the core of professional attributions and competencies and triggering numerous pressures and tensions on social workers in different workspaces (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 143).

With regard to working conditions and relations, social workers, as salaried workers, are subjected to the same processes of degradation and violation of rights that the working class as a whole suffers, within the heterogeneity that characterizes it. Among these processes, alongside the public servant, statutory with a contract governed by its own legal regime (deeply attacked at this time), we find the most varied contractual links, among which: the so-called PJs or "pejotization" in the jargon of the area; outsourcing; temporary work; part-time, piecework, project-based work; intermittent work, among others (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 144).

These processes promote the deepest metamorphosis in the professional labor market, even in the state space of public policies, stimulating the individualization of work, forms of performance evaluation based on productivity goals and differentiated remuneration, promoting competition among workers and collective demobilization (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 144-145).

In the pandemic scenario, what was residual and embryonic, such as remote work or telework, became widespread as the "new normal" — which should not be naturalized — requiring critical monitoring, as certainly many of these work modalities, adopted in the situation of exceptionality, tend to remain in the post-pandemic period, including in teaching work. It is a set of new work situations imposed from the top down in most institutions, even in universities (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.145).

Therefore, although capital hegemonically appropriates digital technologies to increase the levels of productivity and overexploitation of labor, it is necessary to adopt strategies to tension and use these technologies in the counter-hegemonic perspective of strengthening the ethical-political values that guide the professional project (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 147).

The professional routine is marked by tensions and challenges, but it is in this same daily life that the possibilities of overcoming and coping with the imposed requirements are presented, to which social workers are not obliged to submit, having relative autonomy to propose and negotiate their professional proposals (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p. 150).



To face this challenging situation that challenges workers and professional and academic representation entities, it is essential to expand and multiply collective forums and debates, even if virtual, internal and external to Social Work. And to rescue the sense of class belonging and alliances with collective forces of resistance (Raichelis; Arregui, 2021, p.150).

The social worker stood out as a frontline worker in the pandemic, being called upon to act in the fight against covid-19 in health policy, in a scenario of great complexities and challenges.

At first, two major orders of inflection in the work of social workers in health policy in this context can be listed: the first is directly related to their condition as workers; the second concerns their place in health policy and the demands and attributions required of professionals (Soares et al., 2021, p. 124).

Soares (2021, p. 124) reports that in relation to the condition of health workers, the hiring of social workers increasingly expressed the precariousness and deep privatization of health policy. In the context of the strategies to cope with covid-19, most of the expansion of health services took place through the outsourcing of health management and, therefore, with precarious, insecure, and temporary work contracts, in addition to the historical trend of low wages. At the time of the pandemic, there was a deepening of the on-call organization of professional work — including being used as a strategy to reduce exposure and risk for workers. However, contradictorily, in many services this strategy has intensified the precariousness of working conditions and health risks and problems. This is because it was relatively frequent to perform shifts lasting 24 hours of work, characterized as strenuous and that put at risk both the health of professionals and the quality of the services provided.

In the first moment, most social workers had to deal with two important tensions: the difficulties of access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and the demarcation of their attributions and professional competences. Especially in the initial phase of coping with the pandemic, there was a shortage in the availability of PPE in several services, and the tendency was to print an extreme rationalization that denied the use of PPE for professionals who were not in direct contact with patients with covid-19. However, social workers, even if they were not directly caring for users with COVID-19, were often caring for their family members (Soares et al., 2021, p. 125).

About professional competencies and attributions, the document "Management of bodies in the context of the new coronavirus covid-19", prepared by the Ministry of Health, recommended that Social Services communicate death to family members, friends, and guardians during the pandemic (Brasil, 2020c *apud* Soares et al., 2021, p. 126). This demand, explicitly expressed by



the Ministry of Health, made it possible for all activities related to information and/or communication with the families of users undergoing treatment for covid-19, including those in the medical field, such as clinical bulletins, to be requested from social workers in the context of the pandemic (Matos, 2020b *apud* Soares et al., 2021, p. 126). These new competencies imposed by the pandemic context generated many conflicts between professionals and with family members, who often did not accept the information provided by the social worker and demanded details that could only be provided by doctors.

Thus, during the contradictions of health policy, with intense precariousness, defunding, privatization and fragmentation, without articulation and coordination of confrontation at the federal level, with expressions of a genocidal policy at the same time as extremely privatist and ultraliberal, Social Work is required to reproduce the technical, voluntarist and conservative professional profile. The CFESS/CRESS group acted quickly and pertinently, issuing Normative Guideline No. 03/2020, which emphasizes that both the communication of death and the transfer of information of a clinical nature are not the attributions of social workers (Soares et al., 2021, p. 126).

4 FINAL THOUGHTS

In the midst of the flank of contradictions of the pandemic, Social Work, with its ethical-political-professional project, was able to propose the most qualified responses to the complex demands of the health crisis and the expressions of the social question, based on collective strategies of reflection on reality and planning, internal and external articulations to the services, including with social movements, potentiating the tension of the limits of relative professional autonomy, in defense of the SUS, health reform and an emancipated sociability. Finally, in the resistance for the life of all and against barbarism (Soares et al., 2021, p. 130).



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