


SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK: REFLECTIONS ON WORKING CONDITIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the interlocution between social work and social assistance policy, a privileged field of action for social workers. The objective is to critically reflect on the working conditions of social workers within the scope of the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS), in view of the transformations that have occurred in the world of work in recent decades, from the process of productive restructuring and the organization of the political and ideological system through neoliberal policy. It is a bibliographic and documentary article, based on the available legislation on the subject, the production of some authors and the analysis of data from the SUAS 2023 Census. Among the results, it is highlighted that social work is a profession inserted in the socio-technical division of labor, being negatively affected by the dictates of neoliberal policy, which orders regressive forms of labor rights, once conquered, to the detriment of precarious and fragile bonds and working conditions, reflecting on the quality of services provided to users. A paradox in the social assistance policy is highlighted: social workers are required to guarantee the social rights of users, while they do not have adequate and/or sufficient working conditions.

Keywords: Social assistance. Social services. Neoliberal policy. Work.

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INTRODUCTION

The social assistance policy reaches a major regulatory milestone when it is inserted as an integral part of the tripod of Brazilian social security, alongside the health and social security policy, as of the Federal Constitution of 1988. Since then, social assistance has followed a path in search of recognition as a public policy, hence its regulation in 1993 through the Organic Law of Social Assistance – LOAS, which implemented the Unified Social Assistance System – SUAS, and subsequent regulations, namely: Basic Operational Norm of Human Resources of the Unified Social Assistance System – NOB -RH/ SUAS (2006); the National Typification of Social Assistance Services (2009) and the Basic Operational Norm of the Unified Social Assistance System – NOB/SUAS (2012).

That said, it is important to highlight the contradictions intrinsic to the reformulations of the national social protection model, and it is essential to study the workforce used by the State in the implementation of social policies, among which are the professional categories, such as social work. Thus, the article in question discusses the interlocution between social work and social assistance policy, a privileged field of action for social workers. The main objective is to critically reflect on the working conditions of social workers in the SUAS, in view of the transformations that have occurred in the world of work in recent decades, correlated with the incorporation of the neoliberal project in Brazil and in the world.

The interest in the theme is due to its relevance and topicality, occupying a place at the center of the debate on social policies and the work category. It seeks to theoretically understand the demands and challenges posed to the social workers who make up the reference teams of the social assistance services. Ultimately, the article aims to contribute to the debate on the working conditions of social workers in the social assistance policy, as well as the limits and strategies that these professionals find to achieve their rights and duties as workers in this policy.

Of a bibliographic and documentary nature, the research focused on theoretical productions and legislation in the field of social assistance and social work. The treatment of the data favored works by authors who were closest to the proposed object, electing those considered references in the field of discussion. In addition, quantitative data available in the last Suas Census (2023) concerning the work management category were used.

The article will be divided into three sections. The first section will consist of the introduction of the research, with brief notes on the subject, describing the objectives of the study, the relevance, the methodology and the purpose. The second section corresponds to a critical reflection on the performance of the social worker in the social assistance policy,



discussing their working conditions in the face of the incorporation of the neoliberal proposal. And finally, the third section will be dedicated to final considerations.

The objective of this work is not to exhaust the discussions about the phenomenon, however, in view of the above and the content expressed in the following pages, it is intended that this investigative process reaches contributions to the collection of social work and other areas of the social sciences, in addition to arousing reflections on the subject studied.

SOCIAL POLICIES, THE STATE NEOLIBERAL AND SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICY

According to Behring and Boschetti (2008), we cannot measure an exact date for the emergence of the first social policies, but we can affirm that the appearance converges with the rise of the capitalist system. In this way, it is possible to infer that social policies are within a contradictory and complex web, presenting themselves as a solution pointed out by the State to attenuate the expressions of the social question, in the midst of the dispute between meeting the interests of capital (guaranteeing the necessary conditions for its maintenance) and the working class (producer of surplus value).

A social question apprehended as the set of expressions of the inequalities of mature capitalist society, which has a common root: social production is increasingly collective, labor becomes more broadly social, while the appropriation of its fruits remains private, monopolized by a part of society. (Iamamoto, 2015, p. 27).

Therefore, we can say that the social question is the result of the exploitation of capital over labor, and therefore, the bourgeois State does not have a real interest in solving the root of the problem of the social question, as this would alter the relationship of exploitation between capital and labor, therefore, it directs its action in a fragmented and fragile way through social policies.

Significant changes in the world of work occurred in the 1970s, until then the previous decade known as the "golden years" of capital, the current protection model consisted of the *Welfare State*, belonging to the Beveridge Plan, of 1942, with the premise of implementing a universal social security system, without the need for prior contribution. However, in the mid-1960s, capital justifies not being able to maintain the high rates of profit due to the considerable amount of unemployed population, increasingly demanding the attention of the State through public policies to meet its basic needs, generating a series of questions regarding the continuity of social policies financed by the State.

Thus, the *Welfare State crisis* that began in the 1970s was characterized by a period of high fiscal deficit, State indebtedness and stagnation of profits, corroborating the



implementation of a set of measures with the intention of overcoming the crisis. Among these measures, the productive restructuring and the reorganization of the political and ideological system through neoliberal macroeconomic policy stand out. According to Sitcovsky (2010, p. 167-168):

This process is responsible for directing the role of the State, which, instead of public social policies that guarantee the reproduction of the labor force, adopts the perspective of the minimum State for the social and maximum for capital, with the latter assuming the deregulation of the labor force, associated with a lack of responsibility for the 'social question'. This process of transformation of the pattern of State intervention in the 'social question' gives rise to a type of intervention that advocates the participation of the so-called third sector or part of civil society.

It can be seen, therefore, that the measures used to overcome the economic crisis reverberate negatively in the working class, the minimal State for the social leads to the reduction of jobs, increase in unemployment rates, emergence of underemployment, emphasis on outsourcing and various forms of work without the guarantee of rights. It is credible to say that neoliberal ideology promotes the "liquidation of social rights, the privatization of the State, the scrapping of public services and the systematic implementation of a macroeconomic policy harmful to the mass of the population [...]" (Netto, 1999, p. 107).

In order to advance with the proposed study, it is initially of fundamental importance to understand the historical context of the implementation of the social assistance policy in Brazil, especially from the 1990s onwards, a period of intensification of the so-called crisis of capital, of a structural nature, a remnant of the economic recession that began in the 1970s, implying new forms of organization and expansion of capitalism.

In Brazil, the neoliberal policy was implemented during the government of Fernando Collor de Melo (1990-1992), as a strategy to reduce the functions of the State and expand the market through the maneuver of economic opening, triggering the privatization process in the country. Neoliberalism, as the system became known, is configured as a setback to the social rights conquered by the working class in the 1980s, materialized by the Federal Constitution of 1988, constituting an obstacle to its incorporation.

It is important to highlight that the Federal Constitution of 1988 consists of the concreteness of the democratic achievements arising from the political struggles of various sectors and social classes. Emphasizing that such achievements were the result of disputes between different projects, and were sometimes complex and contradictory (Sousa, 2013), given that the country was already feeling neoliberal influences, as a result of the game of forces that prevailed in the country at that time.



The Magna Carta established a new system of social protection through social security, universalizing social rights, considering social security, health and social assistance as a public issue and the responsibility of the State to guarantee them to the population, as Article 194 points out "social security comprises an integrated set of actions initiated by the public authorities and society, aimed at ensuring the rights related to health, social security and social assistance" (Brasil, 1988). The central policy of this article corresponds to the social assistance policy, so we will direct the analysis to its conjuncture. Social assistance emerges as a public policy, a duty of the State and a right of all citizens, with the target audience being those who are in a situation of social vulnerability, striving to ensure protection at all stages of life, carrying out actions that achieve the full development of individuals, through the provision of services, programs, projects and assistance benefits. Another historical gain took place in 1993 with the enactment of Law No. 8,742 entitled Organic Law of Social Assistance – LOAS, inserting itself as a regulator of social assistance policy through the proposition of norms and criteria, in addition to structuring the management of the policy through the Unified Social Assistance System – SUAS. More advances occurred from several norms, namely: Basic Operational Norm of Human Resources of the Unified Social Assistance System – NOB -RH/ SUAS (2006); the National Typification of Social Assistance Services (2009) and the Basic Operational Norm of the Unified Social Assistance System – NOB/SUAS (2012).

[...] assistance as a social right by the 1988 Constitution and regulation by the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS) in 1993, meant, for assistance, the end of the crossing of the desert, since such recognition, having an unquestionable political and social meaning, presents itself as the privileged occasion to overcome its current understanding as a moral duty to help, and understand it as a legal duty to guarantee social benefits and services (Boschetti, 2000, p. 140).

Although social assistance in its normative documents brings in itself a discourse of access to social rights and citizenship, it is necessary to consider its functionality in the capitalist system, while it enables the achievement of rights, it plays a primordial role in the reproduction of the order of capital, through the process of consumption inherent to the nature of income transfer programs, For example, the Bolsa Família, by allocating assistance actions to alleviate poverty and extreme poverty of the population. This process is noticeable when we analyze the social assistance budget, which describes in its content that 90% of the policy's resources are allocated to income transfer programs (Silva, 2020). Such social security resources, when mostly applied to income transfer programs instead of destined to social assistance services, configure social assistance as a compensatory social policy.



Despite the constitutional advance, social assistance suffers great impacts with the adoption of neoliberal measures, reaching the users of the policy, but also its workers. The flexibilization of work and the deregulation of the State have contributed to the deepening of the precariousness of work, processes that equally affect the relationships and work of higher education professionals working in public and private institutions, among which we highlight social workers, generating lower wages, precariousness of bonds, job insecurity, increase in productivity, lack of career progression, illness, among many other manifestations resulting from the growing exploitation of the salaried workforce (Raichelis, 2011).

THE WORK OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN SUAS

The contemporary transformations that have occurred in the world of work, and more specifically, in Brazil from the 1990s onwards, with the government's adherence to the neoliberal project, awaken changes in the way the State manages and the execution of social policies, provoking new requirements, demands and challenges to the work of social workers in the scope of public policies. including social assistance.

The social assistance policy consists of a relevant socio-occupational space in which social service professionals are inserted. In such a way that almost half of the professionals in the category carry out their activities in social assistance. According to a survey carried out by the Federal Council of Social Service – CFESS regarding the Profile of Social Workers in Brazil in 2021, about 49.79% of professionals work in social assistance policy, whether in the preparation, coordination and execution of programs and projects of the policy.

Another important means of measurement corresponds to the SUAS Census, characterized as an instrument that generates information regarding the supply of social assistance services, providing means of evaluating the social assistance policy, as well as providing data for the analysis of professional categories. In line with the last Suas Census carried out in 2023, the number of social workers inserted in social assistance equipment, in the Social Assistance Reference Centers - CRAS and Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centers - CREAS, corresponds to 29,910 professionals, equivalent to 28.8% of the total number of higher education professionals working in social assistance equipment throughout Brazil.

The data presented are in line with the materialization of the SUAS in the national territory, corroborating the expansion of jobs for social workers and other categories working in the area. Simultaneously and contradictorily, the precariousness of the conditions in



which this work is carried out deepens in the process, since social service professionals are included in the condition of salaried workers, thus subordinated to a process of alienation, reduction of their technical autonomy and intensification of work (Raichelis, 2010).

The reorganization of capital as a result of the process of productive restructuring and the implementation of the neoliberal program, brings with it the aggravation of the social question, in this way, the daily life of professionals is altered, whether in labor relations or in the requests made to the social service by the user population. At this time, social assistance requires more and more professionals to meet such demands.

The premise is that the current socio-historical framework is not reduced to a background so that one can later discuss professional work. It crosses and shapes the daily professional practice of the Social Worker, affecting their working conditions and relationships, as well as the living conditions of the population that uses social services. (Iamamoto, 2015, p. 19).

Demands recognized as new expressions of the social issue, directing professionals to experience "new forms" of work, felt in precarious forms of employment, through temporary contracts, outsourcing, turnover of professionals, insecurity due to the absence of stable contracts, low wages, precarious or often absence of continuing education, in addition to the scarcity of adequate physical and material conditions for the execution of work. At this moment, a paradox in the social assistance policy stands out: social workers are required to guarantee the social rights of the users of the policy, while they do not have adequate and/or sufficient working conditions.

Therefore, the management of work and workers in the SUAS, its effectiveness and the scope of rights, presents itself as one of the greatest challenges in the social assistance policy. The main advance in normative terms corresponds to the institution of the Basic Human Resources Norm of the Unified Social Assistance System - NOB-RH/SUAS, in 2006, by establishing reference teams for social assistance equipment, which should be composed of professionals admitted through public competition, in addition to propositions in the sense of materializing a policy of permanent training of human resources, requirements regarding material, technical and ethical working conditions, as well as establishment of guidelines for the implementation of Career Plans, Positions and Salaries within the scope of the SUAS.

The implementation of Suas requires new forms of regulation, organization and management of work and, certainly, the expansion of the number of workers with functional stability is an essential condition, along with continuous training and qualification processes, from entry via public competition, definition of positions and careers and evaluation and progression processes, characterization of profiles of teams and services, in addition to compatible remuneration and safety at work. (Raichelis, 2010, p. 761).



By way of illustration of the precariousness of work in social assistance policy, when it comes to employment relationships, data from the Suas Census (2023) show that of the professionals who work in the Social Assistance Reference Centers - CRAS across the country, only 28% are statutory, while in the Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centers - CREAS the total number of professionals with a statutory contract corresponds to 39.8%. Numbers that contradict the norms established for the policy in the NOB-RH/SUAS, by prioritizing unstable work relationships, outsourcing, in addition to hiring linked to political "agreements", traces of the densification of the neoliberal project in Brazil. The flexibility in the forms of hiring to the detriment of the public exam promotes greater turnover of social workers, and consequently, the discontinuity of family monitoring actions, making it impossible to offer critical, continuous social work that unveils the real needs of users, as well as the respective access to rights.

In view of the above, we can infer that social workers are exposed to precarious working conditions on a daily basis, while they do not have absolute autonomy in their intervention, considering that they are subjected to institutional power relations, in view of their incorporation into the socio-technical division of labor (Faleiros, 1997).

Therefore, actions aimed at overcoming the dismantling of current working conditions are essential, one of them consists of proposing strategies of struggle and political organization of the professional category of social work with the working classes. On this issue, it is interesting to note that Raichelis (2010) observes that neoliberal ideology operates several mechanisms to divide the category of workers from their collective entities, as it recognizes that the process of collective action is strong, transformative and creates methods for the improvement of working conditions.

However, it remains to be clarified that this is not the struggle of just one category. However, the process of political organization is a struggle from which social work cannot exempt itself, as it would be emptying its object of critical study and historical content.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The consolidation of the social assistance policy as a social security policy, the responsibility of the State and the right of the citizen, presents itself as a great challenge, considering the current scenario of fiscal adjustment, which weakens social policies.

The neoliberal macroeconomic policy emerges as a measure to overcome the economic crisis that began in the 1970s, having as its prerogative the minimum State for the social and maximum for capital. The transformations that have occurred in the world of work in recent decades, from the process of productive restructuring and the organization of the



political and ideological system through neoliberal policy, have triggered a series of dismantlings, strongly affecting the working class, which has come to live with the debasement of social rights conquered historically, as well as the increase in expressions of the social question.

Inserted in the socio-technical division of labor, the social service professional is negatively affected by the dictates of the neoliberal policy, which orders regressive forms of labor rights, once conquered, to the detriment of precarious and fragile bonds and working conditions, reflecting on the quality of services provided to users.

The social assistance policy is a privileged field of action for social workers, and from the standardization of the Organic Law of Social Assistance – LOAS and other norms, the social service was required to work with the users of the policy, offering programs, projects and social assistance services. With regard to work management, the main advance concerns the implementation of the Basic Human Resources Norm of the Unified Social Assistance System - NOB-RH/SUAS, in 2006, considering elements of qualification, protection of work and workers, as well as the material conditions necessary for the development of actions.

However, contrary to the legal direction, the flexibilization of work and the deregulation of the State have contributed to the densification of the precariousness of work, also affecting social services. The lowering of wages, insecurity due to the absence of stable contracts, absence of perspective regarding career progression, illness, temporary contracts, turnover of professionals, in addition to the scarcity of adequate physical and material conditions for the execution of the work, are some reflections of the working conditions that affect the social workers inserted in the social assistance policy. A paradox in the social assistance policy is highlighted: social workers are required to guarantee the social rights of users, while they do not have adequate and/or sufficient working conditions.

In view of the above, the proposal of strategies of struggle and political organization of the professional category of social work with the working classes becomes an essential condition in the attempt to overcome the terrible working conditions in force. It is important to clarify that the struggle is not just for a professional category. The way out, certainly, is collective.



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