

# International Journal of Human Sciences Research

## THE WORK OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE PANDEMIC SCENARIO: BETWEEN PRODUCTIVISM AND THE NEW OFFENSIVES OF NEOLIBERAL HEGEMONY

---

*Carla Cristina Marinho Piva*

Social worker, PhD student in the  
Postgraduate Program in Social Work at  
PUC-Rio, Master in Social Work at UERJ  
<https://shortest.link/1FSG>  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6602-3454>

*Juliana Nair Marinho Piva*

Bachelor of Nursing from the  
Federal University of the State of  
Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO)  
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/8984790841791678>  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0483-518X>

All content in this magazine is  
licensed under a Creative Com-  
mons Attribution License. Attri-  
bution-Non-Commercial-Non-  
Derivatives 4.0 International (CC  
BY-NC-ND 4.0).



**Abstract:** The article in vogue proposes to reflect on the impacts of the covid-19 conjuncture for the work of social workers in the public sphere. The text deals with the reflections of the neoliberal conjuncture and the reconfigurations for the professional field, reaffirming the conservative bases that mark the history of the profession. It presents elements for analysis related to the harmful effects of exploitation by capital, associated with a Brazilian conjuncture marked by regressive policies and shaped by selective actions that are materialized by the removal of rights and reinforce the strategies of demobilization of the working class through power and control of labor. This context interferes and threatens the autonomy and participation of workers in the historical process of collective organization in a democratic society.

**Keywords:** Labor, social worker; hegemony; neoliberalism; pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION

This article proposes to reflect on the impacts of the covid-19 situation on the work of social workers in the public sphere. In this tone, the text deals with the reflexes of the neoliberal conjuncture and the reconfigurations for the professional field, reaffirming the conservative bases that mark the history of the profession and new processes of precariousness faced by the metamorphoses of work.

The analysis transits through the harmful effects of capital for workers, associated in a Brazilian situation marked by regressive policies and shaped by selective actions that, in its aegis, materialize through the disenfranchisement of rights and reinforce the strategies of demobilization of the working class through power and control of work, threatening the autonomy and participation of workers in the historical process of organization in a democratic society.

Professionals face a hegemonic crisis and the destructive effects of the pandemic interfere in different fields of professional intervention. In addition to the health sector and other professional segments, I emphasize the experience of social assistance that, as a public policy, is in deep setback in the face of losses in the field of social protection, fostered by a conservative interpretation that puts history in check of achievement materialized through the first decade of the 2000s.

1. Neoliberal hegemony: situations of involution to work reiterated by the pandemic

The theme of the political situation in Brazil, marked by authoritarian involution and democratic setback, point to a serious picture in multiple dimensions in the country in the current decade. An objectively dramatic context, especially for the popular masses and social subjects in different fields of work. The analyzes point out that the combined effects of the organic crisis of the pandemic's criminal management, of the desire to take Brazil back to the past, reproduce a social situation marked by a brutal and unilateral class war.

Since the first decade of the 2000s, we have been living a global organic crisis that does not only structurally affect the forms of production, accumulation and distribution of wealth, however, the same hegemony of the ruling classes, of traditional ideologies, that is, the crisis of representation relationship of classical parliamentary systems. A panorama that determined the immersion of new anti-democratic positions and the growth of forces of authoritarian inspiration at the international level, which again aroused scientific and political interest in the paradigm of fascism.

Given all this, it is urgent to carefully interpret the different political contexts, based on the conditions that determined their emergence and their ideological

characteristics. Considering the confluence of the crises triggered by the epidemic of the new coronavirus, thinking about the new impacts on the world of work presupposes interpreting the reconfiguration of capital in its neoliberal financialized globalization phase, also suggesting deciphering the socio-historical bases of the ongoing societal transformations and the objective inflections for the working class.

Antunes (2021) points out that since the 70s, we have been moving through a highly destructive world, ruled by neoliberal hegemony, configured by the domination of financial capital and processes of change in technology. Through the studies and conclusions, the author maintains that the capital metabolism system is antisocial and presents a lethality for workers in the pandemic scenario:

This is the categorical imperative of our time. The pandemic is a consequence of a system that is destructive because it is not aimed at humanity, it is aimed at profit. We have to reinvent a new way of life. (p.111)

In the wake of the analyses, the global crisis that is latent in progress with the Covid-19 pandemic, exposes the neoliberal catastrophe that has devastated capitalist societies in the last four decades. The author Druck (2021) emphasizes that this context was already a reality:

We already lived in a situation of social regression at the global level: high levels of unemployment, intensification of precarious work, increased inequality, income concentration, impoverishment, withdrawal of rights, increase of homeless people, occupational illness, dismantling of public health, social security and public education, among others... (p. 02)

The panorama highlighted is the result of a set of counter-reforms and distinct policy designs of neoliberal governments, whether in the labor and state sectors of the public

sphere, among others. The conjectural outline raises the understanding that the origin of the crisis is not limited to the pandemic. As the writings of Antunes (2021) support, the logic of the capital's antisocial metabolism system already presents a path since the 70s, with a deepening in the first decade of the 2000s.

Raichellis (2021) states that the pandemic is not responsible for the emergence of the contemporary crisis, however it rekindles the destructive character of a wide-ranging social crisis, demarcating the visibility of processes that were already underway:

The central idea of our argument is that the health crisis exposed the way in which capitalism had been responding to its crises for nearly four decades, since the 1970s, as a capital strategy to reverse the trend of falling profit rates, in a structural movement of overproduction and underconsumption.” (p. 139)

These references produce the understanding that the precariousness of work represents a strategy of the pattern of capitalist accumulation in times of neoliberal globalization, both in the center and in the dependent periphery. It is a powerful work reorganization mechanism in the context of capitalism hegemonized by finance, which combines flexibilization, outsourcing and informality of work.

These premises support the theoretical bases of the content elaborated here. It is from this centrality that we reflect the set of crises that erupt with the pandemic and its respective fractures for the world of work, in particular, the profession of Social Work, understanding the new scenario and challenges imposed on the daily work of social workers, subjects inserted in relationships based on productivism and control of work processes.

## 1. The social worker and the confrontation with the pandemic: impacts on social assistance

The production of this text is an effort undertaken, based on reflections that emerge in the daily practice of the profession. In this sense, the analyzes depart from a set of daily professional experiences and theoretical basis that underlies this paper and are based on the discussion of the work of social workers in the context of Covid-19, considering the impact generated by the pandemic in the country since 2020. The concerns follow the path of leaning, towards an interpretation and circumstantial re-reading of the splits produced by the responses of the State in face of the harmful effects and human finiteness imposed by the pandemic that reflect directly on the field of professional practice. Understanding the political situation presupposes, within a critical analysis perspective, identifying a set of narratives and power relations in dispute. The new demands for approximation, the collective communication strategies with the population and the use of new technological tools by the professional class, suggest the resumption of a critical reading of work processes, given the confrontation of the ultraliberal positions of the State in its relations with society. In the preventive field, distancing preserves lives, however, the popular classes break with this format as the precarious historical conditions of existence and work, demand a break with isolation towards access to the right services guaranteed by the social assistance policy, that is, the construction of concrete survival alternatives. Although there is an express movement to confront human finitude, the presence of a State that does not invest in methodologies and/or adequate and structured technical resources to face a pandemic of advances and lethal proportions for humanity is reiterated. We are challenged to provoke debates in the face of a process

of pandemic subalternity and authoritarian politics, discussions that materialize in the agendas of professional category bodies, thinking about social inequality, the different processes of exclusion of popular classes in the context of capital reconfiguration, the conservatism evoked by the design of fractured public policies, producing diffuse reflections for the work processes of the social worker and the intensification of bourgeois ideas towards class hegemony and control of the material conditions of existence of the working class.

Regarding the pandemic situation, the author Gilberto Calil indicates, through his reflections, relevant aspects for us to think about the phenomenon of disqualification of the pandemic:

In this perspective, we understand that the disqualification of the pandemic (“hysteria”, “bad story”, “LIGHT flu”, “neurosis”), the encouragement of attitudes that lead to the acceleration of the rate of contamination (agglomeration, incorrect use of mask, defense of the opening of gyms, beauty salons and schools) and the propagation of false solutions, especially with misleading advertisements of drugs that have been proven to be ineffective. (CALIL: 2020, P. 02)

The current government, in its conservative agenda and authoritarian escalation, reproduces, through the overexploitation of work, the degradation of human beings in their material conditions of existence, the encouragement of structural unemployment and consequent forms of expansion of violence. In addition, the bourgeois ideals expressed through current government policies are registered, in other words, an anti-democratic and denial bourgeoisie.

In this aegis, the set of notes undertaken here arise from the accumulation of research and thought-provoking dialogues with social workers and express constructions based on paths traveled, aiming to contribute to the

necessary approximations of the analyzes of the professional universe, as explained by the authors Button and Nunes (2020):

... It is important to consider the work of social workers, whose duties are to defend the right to life. Although, at first glance, this pandemic and the way to solve it appears to be focused on the health sector, we argue that all areas in which Social Work operates are compromised, since the crisis we are witnessing highlights the need for public systems of strong social protection, as well as a critical and active role in the reality we are living. (p. 251)

The authors Button and Nunes also sustain the multiple challenges that involve the apprehension of work from this design of contemporary sociability, particularly in Social Work, the importance of rethinking the place of the professional subject and the work carried out by social workers in the search for implement new possible forms of collective approach and organization.

We understand the social worker as part of the working class. The working class concept adopted here takes as its starting point Marx's analysis (1975) on the relations between capital and labor, without disregarding the heterogeneous character they present today. The set of workers in capitalist society is made up of professionals employed with social bonds and rights, unemployed, informal workers, workers without the minimum of protection, etc. But they are unified under the same condition: that of being dependent on the sale of force. (BUTTON and NUNES: 2020, p. 253)

Another author who concentrates analysis efforts and devotes attention to studies on the work of social workers, highlighting the reflexes of the public space in the professional intervention process is Marlova (2020):

Social workers, who mostly work within the structure of public services, in the field of social policies, have their daily work affected by this situation, as there is an increase in demand by the population, especially in the

fields of assistance social and health, but it is also affected in their relationships and working conditions. (p. 66)

It is important to point out that the public sphere follows paths and (mis) paths marked by the fragmentation of public policies of social scope, formulated from a context of involution of rights. With regard to working conditions and relationships, social workers, as salaried workers, are professionals subjected to different processes of violation of rights, as stated by Raichellis (2021):

Among these processes, alongside the public servant, statutory with a contract governed by its own legal regime (deeply attacked at that time), we find the most varied contractual bonds, including: the so-called PJs or "pejotization" in the area jargon; outsourcing; temporary work; part-time work, by task, by project; intermittent work, among others. (p. 144)

The author emphasizes the processes that produce neuralgic changes in the professional labor market, even in the state field of public policies, thus reinforcing partial and individualized forms of work. The social worker is inserted in a daily life marked by forceful productive goals at work, even in the pandemic scenario. The characterization and rationality lead to disputes in the relationships between the professional segments, generating collective demobilization. Also on this agenda, telework assumes a place in the interventional dimension in the face of the pandemic crisis, however, workers are subordinated to the production and reproduction of work, deprived of structural conditions for execution. Interventions take on an improvised character, in addition to workers using their particular resources in the face of the challenges imposed by the epidemic. Experiences such as social security and the judicial sector make it possible to verify that the telework modality declares the tactics of effectiveness and increased productivity. The

organization and representation of the work of the social worker are directly subsumed under the overwhelming effects of capital. How to think about mobilization in social assistance in this panorama? How to face, through collective force, the mechanisms of state control and domination? These questions reiterate concerns for the production of resistance. Facing the pandemic means facing capital.

## **FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The new authoritarian and conservative political project underway in Brazil points to the urgent need for a reactivity of the working class. As professionals, it is crucial to approach studies, productions and intellectual debates, based on analytical categories that contribute to a critical reading of socio-historical processes based on the refusal of homogenized interpretations about the daily life of the pandemic and neoliberal hegemony. Author Gianni Fresu (2021) draws attention to the misunderstanding and danger of homogenizing the analysis of the situation, synthesizing our assessments from quantitative equations. It is crucial to use theoretical categories with critical lenses to identify convergences between the past and the present. It is important to identify the totalitarian roots, in order to interpret the contradictions of the contemporary world in a broader way. We cannot simplify reality. Therefore, in addition to the authors incorporated and cited in the text, we reiterate the importance of investing in studies based on Marx's thought and Gramsci's writings. They represent substantial sources for understanding the contradictory dynamics of reality, especially the political situation in Brazil in the pandemic.

The interest in thinking about the work of the social worker in the pandemic scenario raises the maturity of the theoretical approach used

by authors who are dedicated to researching the topic, in addition to representing an alternative for strengthening my place as a doctoral researcher, statutory worker towards the strengthening of the category professional in times of a destructive situation in different instances. I dedicate these reflections to social workers who share the field of labor and even to those who were interrupted in their course by the lethal nature of the pandemic. The interventional dimension composes the theoretical and practical universe of Social Work professionals and requires critical problematizations and articulations with a character of resistance from workers, towards collective coping strategies towards the challenging pandemic situation.

## REFERENCES

ANTUNES.R. O vilipêndio da Covid-19 e o imperativo de reinventar o mundo. *O Social em Questão* 49, RJ.

BOTÃO. M, e NUNES, N.R. A relevância do trabalho dos assistentes sociais no enfrentamento à pandemia da COVID-19, in *Stampa, Inez, Lole.Gomes R. (Org) A, Para Além da Quarentena. Reflexões sobre Crise e Pandemia.*

CALIL. G. G. A negação da pandemia: reflexões sobre a estratégia bolsonarista. *Serviço Social e Sociedade* N. 140, Cortez, SP, 2021.

DRUCK, M.G.F. A Tragédia Neoliberal: a pandemia e o lugar do trabalho In *O Social em Questão* 47, RJ, 2020.

MARLOVA. E. F.V. A precarização das relações e condições de trabalho dos(as) assistentes sociais em tempos de “reforma trabalhista”. In *O Social em Questão* 47, RJ, 2020.

RAICHELIS. R e ARRIGUI C. C. O trabalho no fio da navalha: nova morfologia no Serviço Social em tempos de devastação e pandemia. *Serviço Social e Sociedade* N 140. SP, 2021.