

# The Social Context of Workplace Bullying and Its Link to the Health of Workers in Brazil

*Margarida Barreto*

---

## **Brief considerations on the organization of work**

This essay deals with a frequently discussed contemporary topic: the organization of work and the health of those who perform work. As the organization of work has been modified, exploitation of the working class has intensified and multiplied at the same time. Research in this field informs our knowledge of work conditions and organizational density, including the intensity of work and the use of time by the capitalist. We clearly see emergent risks, which men and women are exposed to on a daily basis, related to the demands of the economy (in production and administration) during their exhausting work day.

The new regimes and rules imposed on the execution of work have impacted the development of “self” and “other,” affecting self-identity as a creator of values and a driver of daily activities. As such, new discourses have been added to the history of work-related morbidity and mortality. This has been a consequence of a world in constant flux and with an increasingly destructive nature in that it savagely appropriates the wealth and excess of labor, while stimulating competitiveness, individualism and unbridled consumerism. This dynamic feeds and perpetuates the social metabolism of capital in its current phase.<sup>1</sup>

To the International Labour Organization (ILO), the changes in the organization of labor associated with technological advances decisively contributed to the emergence of new workplace risk factors, with unprecedented consequences for health and

safety in the workplace. The new risk factors exist alongside old ones and they are concentrated in three main categories:

- 1) New technologies and processes of production, such as nanotechnology, biotechnology, etc.
- 2) New conditions of work, meaning long work days, the intensification of work, the growth of the informal sector, etc.
- 3) New forms of employment, such as independent, part-time, home-based, subcontracted, temporarily contracted, or other arrangements of work.

But let’s not fool ourselves – the source of this is much more distant. These unprecedented scenarios are rooted in neoliberal globalization, in its imposing, dominant, and hegemonic quality which devalues goods and services while at the same time disqualifying and discounting those who do not follow the mercantilist rule of maximizing profits and meeting targets in the shortest time possible.

According to Souza Santos<sup>2</sup> neoliberal globalization does not only modify the place of men and women in the process of production, but it also constitutes

*a new regime of accumulation of capital more intensely globalized than those in the past which seeks, on the one hand, the de-socialization of capital, freeing it from the social and political bonds that in the past guaranteed some social redistribution, while on the other hand, seeking to make society submit in its entirety to the law of value, under the supposition that all social activity is better organized when it is carried out under the market system.*

That means that during the last four decades of transformations, integrations, and shifts in structure,

---

**Margarida Barreto**, MD, PhD (Social Psychology),  
Pontificia Catholic University, São Paulo, Brazil.  
Email: [megbarreto@uol.com.br](mailto:megbarreto@uol.com.br)

**Received:** November 5, 2011

**Approved:** December 10, 2011

**Conflict of interest:** none

globalization created precariousness of and within work spurring massive lay-offs, increases in under-employment and unemployment (among both men and women), loss of social rights, while favoring the emergence of new forms of exploitation. The consequences of the neoliberal system can be seen in a succession of social events, in which the unequal distribution of costs and opportunities is evident.

All of this has caused two shifts: the increasing inequality between countries deemed to be developed and those considered impoverished as well as the same process of polarization occurring internally within each country. This has led to an exacerbation of differences between social classes, and simultaneously, between genders, races, and ethnicities, often masked by the new discourse of the need for cooperation of workers and the scarcity of highly skilled labor.

Capitalism in its current stage of development, aside from monetizing the workforce at vile prices, devaluing it as much as possible, has come to organize the time of workers, including their family life, and time off. It is undeniable that when time off takes place, it is done in the sphere of consumerism, generating expenditures and false recreation in shopping malls or commercial venues.

### **In search of the real and of reality: facing the new labor risk factors**

The new reality of the world of work suggests that the new risks coexist side by side with the old ones, causing new diseases in addition to the old ones. New causes of death emerge due to the presence of biotech industries which heavily impact workers who participate in the “development of new genetically modified products and organisms,”<sup>3</sup> as well as those who work in agriculture, livestock, and other rural industries. These workers are exposed to a particular risk: developing infection from exposure to mycobacteria, leptospira, anthrax, and biological allergens in their workplaces.

In the agro business, for example, new chemicals have been widely used with no controls in place to safeguard the health of workers. The ILO recognizes that “in the last twenty years, the number of chemical products used in industry has increased substan-

tially and many were not even tested appropriately.”<sup>4</sup>

This means that the negative consequences that these products cause in the lives and health of workers are not well known. The truth is that many of these chemical agents can cause “cancer, risks to gestation and birth, and negatively affect the nervous, immunological and hormonal systems” according to the ILO.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the new organization of labor intensified the shifting of risk associated with subcontracting. The workplace is progressively more uncertain and mutable in spite of its appearance as healthy, responsible, and ethical.

The precarious conditions of work, including an exposure to multiple risks, low salaries, long work days, monotony, and fast pace, coupled with the increasing demands, pressures, and control mechanisms, interfere with the execution of work, with augmented tensions. All of this is reflected in family life by the intrusion of the experiences of work into the home, demanding a way of life and of organizing interpersonal relations learned in the workplace. A new standard of behavior is imposed on the spouse, children, and the whole family, controlling and supervising them. These conditions promote suffering and psychological disorders, making the precariousness of work a new risk factor both in the sphere of work and in life in general.

In terms of the informal sector, workers are not regulated, they have no legal protection, and they suffer illness invisibly, without missing work though they may have a doctor’s note in their pocket. Within this sector there is no reporting of accidents. Workers opt to hide the occurrence of accidents as they can be fired with no notice. They work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions and are exposed to risks without regard for their health or even their lives. What happens to many immigrants is tragic: they are more exploited, they have precarious access to health services, and many times what they make is barely enough to survive. For example, clandestine Bolivian workers in São Paulo are prisoners in rooms with little ventilation, no benefits, and very low wages. These conditions are a clear example of modern slavery.

It is these new risks, along with the old risks that make up the conditions that monopolize, usurp, and become entangled with the daily lives of workers. Both individually and collectively, sudden organizational changes, the extreme demands of work, the poor flow of information, and the terrible relations between superiors and their “collaborators” in the hierarchical structure have a negative impact on workers. The fear of job loss is a source of chronic suffering, imposing very high emotional demands with health consequences that have scarcely been investigated. In facing these unjust and abusive conditions in the workplace, we find the causes of illnesses, accidents, and premature deaths, based on policies of pursuing fast profits.

### **The daily lives of workers**

Today it is almost impossible to talk about the conditions of work without considering the subjective experiences and psychosocial factors within work and non-work environments and relationships. Thus, flexibility, multitasking, the intensification of the pace and content of work, threats and public or private humiliation, excessive demands and controls, are all fundamental elements of work which are responsible for early burnout and the increase of morbidity and mortality in workers.

In this structured totality that is the world of work, we find fragmented individuals suffering mentally, from illnesses, with feelings of guilt and confusion, becoming desensitized to their own suffering and the suffering of others. Their lack of motivation is linked to their feelings of impotence and dissatisfaction. If a colleague who performed well is rewarded, the “non-productive” collective is punished and ridiculed in different ways: in Brazil, dancing the “orange dance” is a common punishment; those who do not meet the target or expectation dress up as women with an orange on their head while they dance with a colleague of the same sex while others follow them. Other dances include the bottle, the chair, the turtle, the piglet and the crab dances among many other musical themes. It is possible for workers to be punished by making them sit in a corner of the room or by losing bathroom privileges.

In these punishments used by workplaces to motivate or discipline, the most prevalent theme is of a sexual/erotic nature (50.4%). In second place for most used is the musical theme, primarily Brazilian folk music used with the intent to humiliate and ridicule.<sup>6</sup>

The act of humiliation simultaneously affirms power and obedience, as well as collective discipline and guilt, negating the legitimacy of the other in group life.<sup>7</sup> These practices cause emotions of sadness related to the unfulfilled desire of having their individuality recognized as a person and as a worker.

In this way, the choice of music serves an important social-psychological function in that it integrates workers into the values of the company, making them believe (especially those that accomplish goals and meet targets) that they are the social cement of the company.<sup>8</sup> This integration occurs thanks to the ability of companies to capture the emotions, desires, and thoughts of workers who stay due to the repetitive rhythm which everyone must obey or due to the fear of being the next to be ridiculed or fired.

Through music, the employer institutes a pedagogic and disciplinary function onto the collective, under the guise of a game. According to Heller,<sup>9</sup> humiliation shows the “power to turn the other into a simple object,” who “each time more humiliated and mistreated ‘manifests’ their subjection.”

Work can always be a source of pleasure or suffering, which is why humiliation and threats help us to understand the source of the rivalry that appears among colleagues in light of four fundamental elements:

- a) The stimulus of competitiveness and individualism.
- b) The shortcomings of human resource policies, in which there is no autonomy to decide or advocate in favor of employees.
- c) Authoritarian supervisory styles that reveal an abuse of power.
- d) The lack of ethics and moral values in labor relations, in spite of organizational discourse.

The changes in the organization of work did not alter the lack of autonomy, lack of time for rest, and the control and imposition of discipline. These acts

occur in an environment in which workers must learn to endure the pressures that they are under in order to satisfy the demands of the modern daily lives that the dominant class aspires to. The history of this simple truth shows us that work time interferes with social relations and with leisure time, causing what Dejours refers to as an “ideology of suffering.”<sup>10</sup>

According to Netto,<sup>11</sup> Lukács sees everyday life as the alpha and the omega of the existence of each and every individual, and as such is a world in which some components stand out:

- a) Heterogeneity: it is composed of the varied aspects of life, such as work, family life, political life, and emotional bonds.
- b) Immediacy: engaging in constant activity, responding immediately, and directly to externally-imposed and self-imposed demands.
- c) Over-extension: in which workers mobilize all of their efforts and attention to meet the multiplicity of demands.

The everyday signifies that work, language, the division of labor, isolation, demands, the goals and interpersonal relations that occur in the workplace constitute the social world integrated within us. That is, all of the components present in a given reality are lived, reproduced, reenacted, and updated routinely by each and every one of us, creating the link between society and the social being. In other words, the relationship with the lived reality, learned and understood in its totality, allows us to know and reflect on, to accept or transform personal experiences, given that it is this “social being” that ultimately determines our consciousness.

In consequence, the discourse of corporate leaders meant to convince their collaborators and hijack their subjectivity, matters very little. However, the practical actions that occur in the workplace are relevant because they relate to the causes of violence and the use of power in these inter-class relations. We are interested in understanding the new strategies of controlling and colonizing the imagination, evident in norms and codes of conduct that seek the creation of docile and obedient bodies. We care about the proclaimed citizen, socially responsible, sustainable corporation, though it is filled with pleasure, desire, perversion, profit and destruction.

Access to that information allows us to understand the consequences of work in the life and the health of the “class-that-works-for-a-living,”<sup>12</sup> and to think that their work takes place while their movements and gestures are watched intently by cameras, prohibited from speaking to each other, and from satisfying physiological necessities in private. They are penalized and ridiculed if they do not meet productivity targets, which are sometimes unrealistic, arousing fear, discomfort, agitation, and disorders within the domains of production.

The pathology of fear imposed on the workplace induces behaviors of domination and of subjection, which foster a climate of permanent threats and stimulates competition, bearable only because of the desire to remain employed. This allows us to understand that in the practice of moral harassment, power and violence cross paths, making the existence of ethical friendship, and bonds of camaraderie impossible and incompatible.

With an aim to maximize the utilization of the class-that-works-for-a-living, corporations unify everyone, working with five elements that will reaffirm and determine the harmony between capital and labor. They are discursive and disciplinary notions, which, side by side with the intensification of working conditions, encompass and spread over the whole collective, causing a variety of impacts in the productive sectors while at the same time encouraging almost complete submission of the worker to the values of the company, in which the increased workload added to the pressure of targets, leading to the premature exhaustion of the workforce. It is a climate that favors the emergence of multiple and repetitive acts of moral violence that affect the whole collective even when the manifestation is toward individuals. We could summarize this information in five areas:

- 1) Hypnotizing and seducing workers by “manipulating their subjectivity”, capturing their desires and colonizing their imagination, making them believe that they are an important part of the company, requiring them to be flexible and to collaborate intensely, meeting targets and demands regardless of the increase of work and exhaustion.<sup>13,14</sup> Many times they are made to believe that the state of affairs is immutable

and as such, must be maintained; other times that things must be changed, and that “the success of the company is the success of the employee.” This aspect constitutes the most important episode in the lives of workers, as they must adhere to the organizational orientation without restrictions. Thus, results-based management creates three kinds of discursive beliefs: a) that everyone is a collaborator; b) a demand for flexibility and full-time dedication; c) an appeal to competencies and performance, which is constantly re-evaluated and can result in professional disqualification, demotion, and detachment from the organization after a verdict such as, “You no longer possess the appropriate profile. You are old.”

- 2) Pillars of affirmation: corruption, cooptation, and lies. The act of expropriating and exploiting the class-that-works-for-a-living by paying high salaries and bonuses to those in high and middle management so that they continue to exacerbate the submission of the working class to the process of production.
- 3) Intimidation: presenting the organization as healthy and socially responsible, while threatening workers with disciplinary action when goals are not reached and the results-based management system is challenged. An example is one of the largest retail stores in the country, in Rio de Janeiro, that discriminated against their employees based on their area of work. For example, those who worked in working class neighborhoods were, to the manager, a group of “poor shits.” Those in other specific areas had derogatory names ascribed to them as well. Frequently, the manager would send degrading e-mails and memos to workers saying that to “please the customer you have to ‘give yourself to him.’”
- 4) Discipline and control: In the world of production it is common to use tools to punish and discipline workers. It is commonplace for workers who have not met sales targets to be punished by isolating them in a small room for hours (sometimes for five or more hours). During this time they cannot be productive and are still expected to reach their next targets.

- 5) Careful selection of an army of workers or warriors of production, who must have and maintain a perfect state of health, which means not being absent from the productive process, and not even seeking medical attention. If they fall ill, their rights are violated and causation is hidden to avoid liability, and they can be relieved of duties as punishment until they quit the job. It is these elements that make the warrior-collaborators of the corporation.

Nearly 100 years ago, Tolstoy,<sup>15</sup> as he analyzed those who are submissive, said that those who submit

*do so not after having judged the issue dispassionately, weighing the advantages and disadvantages, but rather by having placed themselves under the influence of a hypnotic suggestion... Rejecting submission requires reason, separate from effort, which some men are not capable of.*

#### **The health of workers**

We cannot speak of health in the absence of a certain degree of freedom of expression and action, because it is a result of living conditions in which trust and mutual respect, as well as fraternal affection between “equals” and “non-equals,” are present. Health exists in the midst of trust and tolerance with those around us and an expectation that they will exist in present and future. Our ability to act and think is affected when we live under conditions of lack of understanding and recognition of our values.<sup>16</sup> As such, speaking of the health of workers requires an understanding of their work life, the activities they undertake, and their exposure to new risks. We must also understand how and why production is organized, and also reflect on the new configurations of workplace relationships within the process of production. We must remember to analyze the everyday experience of production in constant relation with economic reproduction, and rethink the productive process along with its impacts on social relations by listening carefully to the workers themselves, because it is they who are “builders of value,” those who sicken and die in and from work.

Life in the modern organization does not allow well-being, respectful treatment, support, autonomy,

trust, or recognition. What endures in the modern organization is the dehumanization of work, precariousness, the violation of rights, injustice, and corporate irresponsibility, especially when the meaning of work is centered around productivity and the accumulation of wealth. Thus, we have workers stripped of the power to control their own time, and who are not allowed to express themselves, who do not have autonomy, feel unmotivated, and whose productivity is at the base of their continued employment.

The fear of unemployment makes social life precarious and at the same time causes a “detachment from old belongings,”<sup>17</sup> causing a worker to feel confused, indecisive, perturbed, lost and isolated when faced with the prospect of unemployment. These factors can spur suicidal ideation with great ease.

We reaffirm that our biological understanding allows us to say that life can be thought of as the normative activity of being, or that each individual is capable of gathering information from their environment, absorbing it and reacting to it.<sup>18</sup> We know that human beings are not predetermined *a priori*, but possess the plasticity to institute their own norms.

Illness is foreshadowed by emotions, such as uncertainty, sadness, terror, anxiety, dishonor, shame and is built, reinforced and takes root in the organization of work which pressures workers to produce. In the demands and controls, in the individualism and competition between teams, in the long hours and real or virtual overtime hours, in the shift work on nights and days, in the indifference between colleagues, and in the breakdown of trust and understanding of the suffering of others, we see the impact of this process reflected. In the end, showing what one has is showing what one is: a fragmented self, ripped apart, exposed, involved in non-committal relationships.

As such, the relationships built on the denial of others and the abuse of power, intolerance, mistrust, lies and indifference, cannot create happiness, pleasure, or mutual respect, but rather discontent, illness, submission and passivity, sadness and exhaustion, imposing a great deal of solitude and suffering.

### **Submission in the presence of indescribable humiliation**

Reports of harassment and other acts of violence in the workplace have been increasing at the Ministry of Labor and the Regional Department of Labor, revealing a world that the majority of the population was unaware of. This world is full of hostility, indescribable and repeated humiliation, discrimination, and abuse of power, all of which cause suffering, damage dignity, and violate people’s rights on many levels. In Rio de Janeiro, according to data from the Ministry of Labor, cases under investigation rose from 17 in 2004, to 140 in 2009, a 723% increase. The same situation can be seen in São Paulo, where complaints rose from 23 in 2004 to 222 in 2009, an increase of 865%. Minas Gerais documented an increase from 15 to 120 cases in the same time period (an increase of 700%). In 2010, Campo Grande saw the greatest number of reports in the country: 829 cases, which means two reports every day.

These are acts and actions that everyone is aware of though some are afraid of reporting them and live with feelings of impotence and anger at their inability to face them. Many avoid facing these psychologically torturous situations, which batter the self-esteem with the use of methods that belittle, overload with useless tasks, hide information or punish by withholding work, leaving them inactive or exposing them to ridicule, while keeping them under the constant threat of job loss.

If those who speak out and do not submit, those who criticize and fight for their rights, are the ones attacked for insubordination, and as such must leave the process of production, we ask why it is that most who suffer humiliation prefer obedience over insubordination when faced with acts of violence as targets or witnesses.

We reach the end of this essay presenting some data and a question posed by Atilio Borón, the Argentinean sociologist with whom we feel a sense of affinity:

- After five centuries in existence, what is it that capitalism has to offer us? The world population is 6.8 billion, of which:
  - 1.02 billion are chronically malnourished (FAO, 2009).

- 2 billion have no access to medications ([www.fic.nih.gov](http://www.fic.nih.gov)).
- 884 million have no access to clean drinking water (WHO/UNICEF, 2008).
- 924 million are homeless or in precarious living situations (UN Habitat, 2003)
- 1.6 billion have no electricity (UN Habitat, “Urban Energy”).
- 2.5 billion have no drainage or sewage system (WHO/UNICEF, 2008).
- 774 million adults are illiterate. ([www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org)).
- 18 million annual deaths due to poverty, the majority children under 5 years of age (WHO).
- 218 million children between 5 and 17 who work in conditions of slavery and in dangerous or humiliating jobs as soldiers, prostitutes, servants, in agriculture, construction, or textiles (ILO: The eradication of child labor: a goal within our reach, 2006).
- Between 1988 and 2002, the poorest 25% of the world population dropped their percentage of world income from 1.16% to 0.92%, while the richest 10% grew their fortunes from 64.7% to 71.1% of world wealth. The accumulation of wealth of a few goes hand in hand with the impoverishment of many.
- The 6.4% increase in wealth of the richest would be enough to double the incomes of the bottom 70%, saving countless lives, while reducing suffering and hardship of the poorest.

Atilio Borón<sup>20</sup> warns:

*If humanity has a future, it will clearly be socialist. With capitalism there is no future. Not for the rich nor for the poor. No society survives when its driving force lies in the incessant search for profit and has accumulation as its engine. Sooner rather than later it causes a disintegration of social life, the destruction of the environment, political decadence and a moral crisis. We still have time, but no longer that much!!! Socialism or Barbarism.*

## References

1. Mészáros, István. Produção destrutiva e Estado capitalista. São Paulo: Ensaio; 1989.
2. Sousa-Santos, Boaventura. As vozes do mundo. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira; 2009..
3. International Labour Organization. Risques émergents et nouvelles formes de prévention dans un monde du travail en mutation. Geneva: International Labour Office, 2010..
4. Forster, Susan Christina. Musica e Humilhação. Uma visão através das ações de indenização por dano moral. São Paulo: Editora Edgard Blucher; 2011.
5. Maturana, R. H. Da Biologia à Psicologia. Porto Alegre: Artes Médicas; 1998.
6. Forster, Susan Christina. Musica e Humilhação. Uma visão através das ações de indenização por dano moral. São Paulo: Editora Edgard Blucher. 2011.
7. Heller, Agnes. Los dos pilares de la Ética moderna. Editora: Libros del Innombrab; 2008.
8. Dejours, Christophe. A banalização da injustiça social. São Paulo: Editora Fundação Getúlio Vargas; 2003.
9. Netto, JP, Brant Carvalho, MC. Cotidiano: Conhecimento e crítica. São Paulo: Editora Cortez; 2011.
10. Antunes, R. Adeus ao Trabalho? Ensaio sobre as metamorfoses e a centralidade do mundo do trabalho. 15th Ed. São Paulo: Cortez; 2011.
11. Heloani, R. Gestão e Organização no capitalismo globalizado. São Paulo: Editora Atlas; 2003.
12. Giovanni, A. Trabalho e Subjetividade. O espírito do toyotismo. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial; 2011.
13. Tolstói, L. A insubmissão e outros escritos. São Paulo: Editora Imaginário; 2010.
14. Spinoza,. Ética Demonstrada según el Orden Geométrico. México: Fondo de Cultura Económico; 1992.
15. Castel, R. As metamorfoses da questão social: uma crônica do salário. Petrópolis, Brazil: Vozes; 1998.
16. Caguilhem, G. O normal e o patológico. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Forense Universitária; 2006.
17. Borón, A. O Socialismo no Século 21. Há vida após o neoliberalismo? São Paulo: Expressão Popular; 2010.
18. Borón, A. “Sepa lo que es el capitalismo.” Available at: <http://www.atilioboron.com.ar/2010/05/sepa-lo-que-es-el-capitalismo.html>. Accessed 15 October 2011.