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Social work in Brazil in the vortex of three crises: pandemic, social and political.

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Social Work in Brazil in the Vortex of Three crises: Pandemic, Social and Political

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[†]Deceased 15 June 2022. Rafael was a young researcher who was committed to his research, being able to connect with others, being visible and to making a difference in the world. As colleagues we will miss him and his contributions.

Abstract

Social work in Brazil advocates a radical and critical model of social work theorisation and practice. This article explores the Brazilian theoretical and practice model, identifying the profession as being in the vortex of Covid-19, increasing state economic austerity, attacks on previously hard-won progressive social policy and increasing inequality and precarity. This provides a challenging practice environment. The professional reconceptualisation model proposes that social work needs to fully theorise social difficulties to ensure that the profession intervenes to address the causes of the problems, rather than manifestations underlying them. This is undertaken through aligning itself with working-class conflicts, promoting rights and refusing to accept the rolling back of support already won. The Brazilian framework, located within its social realities, offers an opportunity for social work globally to consider what lessons can be learnt, to recognise the uniqueness of its perspectives and provide solidarity through its recognition.

Keywords: Brazil, international social work, critical and radical social work, political social work

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Introduction

Social work in Brazil offers a unique practice framework, which whilst evidencing some common origins, recognises that each of the Latin American and Caribbean countries has a unique economic and political context, which shapes their theorisation and professional practice (Goin, 2016). As a result, these influence the appropriation of social knowledge and the social trends which influence the shaping of the profession ranging between conservative and emancipatory approaches (Goin, 2016).

The aim of this article is to critically explore the theoretical and practice model of social work in Brazil, which has been buffeted by the Covid-19 pandemic, alongside the ongoing social and political crisis of the country. We will initially explore the importance of the professions theoretical orientation in working with service users, whose difficult living conditions and life chances have worsened as a result of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. We highlight the devastating confluence of the right-wing Bolsonaro government, changes to social policy and the global pandemic, all of which have impacted on all Brazilians, although more acutely experienced by the poor and the black families through higher death rates, unemployment, increased precarity and hunger (Araujo *et al.*, 2020). On 28 March 2022, two years after the first Covid-19 diagnosis in Brazil, there have been 651,255 deaths (Brazil, 2022). To put this in context, in Rio de Janeiro the risk of Covid-19 death for favela's residents is double that of other parts of the city's population, mainly due to social inequality, food precarity, lack of access to clean water and sanitation, poorly housing, difficulties in accessing health services (Fiocruz, 2021). Furthermore, this has implications for social reproduction, especially as women are impacted by increased unemployment, poverty and high levels of unpaid care (UN WOMEN, 2020; Flor *et al.*, 2022). Within this context, social work theorisation and professional commitment to address social challenges are important. Their social work project recognises and promotes the importance of social work as a political process in which addressing inequalities and social reproduction are a key component of professional practice. This is considered a project, due to the profession's commitment to equality, human rights, social justice and democracy, recognising its obligation to ethical and political values and the ongoing struggle by the working class to achieve emancipation (Iamamoto, 2018). Brazilian Social Work is therefore inherently political (Mota, 2013, p. 29), with a recognition that its theoretical and practice models are both different and radical, along with the necessity to analyse social policy to identify all the possibilities for

professional intervention. We end the article calling for social work globally to recognise that Brazil has a unique perspective, which is considered appropriate to its lived reality and promotes this professional model to be promoted in global social work practice.

Brazil in context

Brazil is located in eastern Latin America, with an estimated population of 214,385,382 (IBGE, 2022), around 2.73 per cent of the world population and is the fifth most populous country in the world. Brazil has the dubious distinction of being one of the world's most economically unequal countries, despite being one of the wealthiest (OXFAM International, 2019). Around 52 million people are considered poor (living on less than US\$5.50 per day), and a further 13 million people are extremely poor (living on less than US\$1.90 per day) (IBGE, 2021). The Continuous National Household Sample Survey (IBGE, 2020) highlights that 56.8 per cent of all extremely poor Brazilian's live in the Northeast (this region notably has 27.2 per cent of the population of Brazil). Brazil is marked by deep regional inequalities that are the result of a historical heritage that demarcates territorial use, and the political and economic composition of the country. Inequality is also exacerbated by ethnicity (those self-categorising as 'black' and 'pardo' comprise 55 per cent of the population). This majority population are however more socially disadvantaged compared to 'whites', with 30 per cent of black children experiencing malnutrition and a mortality rate for those aged up to one year old twice as high (UNICEF, 2019). Black women earn around a third less than white men, and 44 per cent less than white women in the job market (Miguel and Biroli, 2014, p. 45).

Brazil has a young population with approximately 20.46 per cent being between zero and fourteen years old (IBGE, 2022), with high levels of deprivation based on ethnicity, socio-economic conditions and geographical location. Children's experiences in growing up are important, as the experience of multiple forms of abuse may have longstanding psychological impacts on an individual's well-being, and is associated with health-related risks later in life, that is substance abuse, obesity, cardiovascular disease, cancer (see for instance Carr *et al.*, 2013; Danese and Tan, 2014). Achievements of the past Labour Party government administration reforms, such as that of President Lula (see IBGE, 2018), lowered Brazil's high infant mortality rate of infants aged under five years from 53.7 per thousand births in 2000 to 12.4 per thousand in 2015. Furthermore, there are significant socio-economic and health variations across the country.

The current health crisis in Brazil, a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, has itself been inserted into a broader and more complex context of

aggravated economic crisis. The socio-economic crisis which the pandemic has intensified, cannot be dissociated from the cumulative effects of neoliberal policy implementation, along with the impact of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, all of which have yet to be overcome. The combined effects of the crisis and its multiple concrete manifestations, including the current health crisis, have aggravated the precarious living conditions of Brazilian workers, particularly those most impoverished, under-employed and unemployed (Garcia *et al.*, 2021). In 2010, 7.3 per cent of the population were living in extreme poverty (Lula government), in 2015 the rate was 4.7 per cent (Dilma government), by 2018 the rate was 6.5 per cent (Temer government) and in 2020 the rate was 6.5 per cent (Bolsonaro's government) (Garcia *et al.*, 2021).

The rise of Covid-19 cases in Brazil has escalated exponentially and consequently by 27 April 2022, confirmed numbers with 30,378,061 confirmed cases and 662,866 confirmed deaths (Brazil, 2022). Authors such as Alonso *et al.* (2020) believe that due to lack of available testing and underreporting of deaths that the numbers are considerably higher. Whilst everyone in the society is at risk, the poorest are the most vulnerable, a position exacerbated (see Ahmed *et al.*, 2020) by precarity and diminishing social support systems and health systems access. Consequently, the lessons of precarity and social work are critical to be learnt.

Contemporary social work in Brazil: The struggle for social equality

The Brazilian Federal Council of Social Work (CFESS), as the federal public authority with responsibility for guiding, disciplining, regulating, supervising and defending professional practice, works alongside the state level Regional Councils (CRESS) (IFSW, 2022). CFESS specifies the professions role as encouraging people's autonomy, citizenship and democracy to improve public quality of life (CFESS, 2010). It has been forty years since social work nationally agreed an ethical–political commitment to the defence of human rights and of the working class, building an alternative social meaning of the profession (Ferguson and Garcia, 2019). As a result, the profession opposes any proposed retrogressive austerity policies rejecting any philosophy which suggests that solutions must be found through pragmatism or conservatism or supposed policy neutrality. Rather the profession views its struggle as rooted in freedom, work and social rights, conceptualising its role as attacking the retreat from any previous progressive progress, the criminalisation of poverty, reductions to hard-won social rights along with ongoing attacks on social security (Ferguson and Garcia, 2019). In this respect, CFESS has advocated for a competent and politically oriented

social work 'to combat the inhumanities and unpayable costs of the capitalist exploitation of labour' (CFESS, 2019, p.).

Social Work in Brazil has been engaged in a historic struggle for the expansion and defence of social class rights. As a result, the Brazilian Ethic Code commits social workers to the 'Positioning in favor of equity and justice which ensures universal access to goods and services related to programs and policies as well as their democratic management; Commitment to eliminate all forms of prejudice, encouraging respect for diversity, the participation of socially discriminated groups and discussing differences' (CFESS, 1993, p. 23). Contemporary social work in Brazil, therefore, has its roots in the democratic political change at the end of the Brazilian dictatorship (Parada, 2007; Behring, 2013) with the profession post-dictatorship, rejecting conservative models of practice (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013). In this context, Galper (1980, pp. 10–11) argues that social work seeks to challenge the politics of compliance, using resistance, political change as tools in that process.

In class-driven societies such as Brazil, the contradictions between economics and politics are experienced and viewed in the antagonism between social classes (Teixeira and Braz, 2009). Consequently, the profession views this as a political and professional project. The Brazilian social work approach rejects any suggestion that the poor are to be blamed for their own poverty, with the profession critically identifying the structural causes of poverty along with the impact of capitalism on social reproduction in society (Parada, 2007). In doing so, social work in Brazil has rejected what it views as hegemonic North American models of social work (due to their perceived dominant roots in theory based in positivism and post-positivism) and has proposed a new ethical political project for the profession.

The national reconceptualisation of social work in Brazil commenced in the 1980s, and this established the purpose of the professions intervention being to understand social problems within their totality and through a critical lens (Mota, 2013, p. 29). This reconceptualisation framework requires that social work has a broad theoretical analysis which recognises the social contradictions within the dynamics of capitalist society. Such that to understand poverty, we need to see it within the context of political, socio-economic, historical, cultural and social class. Poverty cannot therefore be understood only at a surface level but requires the profession to theoretically analyse and seek collective solutions alongside and within the working-class struggle (Mota, 2013). As without this analysis, the intervention would only be based on the appearance or the manifestation of poverty and not as an expression of the conflict between capital and working class (those who sell their labour within the market). Thus, the profession needs to work to raise consciousness about poverty's creation and impact, in order to address all the dimensions which, create, maintain and exacerbate poverty. This

requires social work to promote reflexivity within and alongside service users such that any actions taken are collectively and coherently with the working-class struggle and social reality.

An important role for social work in Brazil is in shaping and evaluating social policy, viewing these ‘as historically determined instruments of social intervention, under state responsibility’ (Montano, 2012, pp. 316–317). Social work has therefore aligned itself with organisations and social movements which defend and fight for the rights, interests and social projects of the oppressed classes (Iamamoto, 2018). It is inspired by Marxism and aligns itself with social movements to illuminate the contradictions as well as the structural crisis of capital along with the financial policies of adjustment which seek to return Latin America’s economic environment to profit rates last seen in the 1970–1980s (Iamamoto, 2018). As a result, the profession recognises the limits of social policies within the context of capitalist social dynamics, but also that social protection systems have supported the lives of a significant portion of the working class (Netto, 2010).

Furthermore, Garcia and Madeira (2020) view societies with a dominant racial ideology such as Brazil as requiring the reduction in exploitation, along with promotion of social justice, freedom and democracy. Social workers must therefore consider the two faces of structural racism, namely that most social service users are black, as well as that 26.5 per cent of the country’s social workers self-identify as black (CFESS, 2005). This has resulted some in the profession (see for instance Leal and Garcia, 2020) to suggest that overcoming structural racism will only occur through the transformation of the ethno-racial context.

Protecting rights of people

Social workers are employed in a range of health, social assistance and justice settings, such that their roles include delivering different services to those involved in the protection of children and adults, working to increase protection from violence, child labour, homelessness, adoption, mental and physical health amongst others and developing social policy.

Within the historical and socio-economic context of Brazil, the limited protections for people which were introduced following democratic reform after dictatorship are now under attack. These include the suppression of rights (through labour reform) which promotes precariousness of work, pension reform, cuts in social policy expenditure, reducing protections towards violence against women and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer/Questioning, Intersex and Asexuality (LGBTQIA+), intolerance and religious fundamentalism, which have resulted in increases in

violence and expropriation of indigenous and quilombola lands (Boschetti, 2017). So to, there has been an increase in the predominance of conservative positions against human rights which often affect the work of social workers, whose daily challenge is to seek alternatives or to expand access to rights, resist the rolling back of rights or work for their expansion (Boschetti, 2017). In this regard, Boschetti (2017) highlights that due to the structural crisis of capital, the visibility of social issues has intensified, revealing the daily challenges which plague the working class.

Within the broader location of rights violations in Brazil, the 658,879 Covid-19 excess deaths (Brazil, 2022) magnify these concerns especially as the link between poverty and inequality has resulted in an estimated 1,148 children under nine years old and 1,926 pregnant and postpartum women deaths.

The defence of current social policy is considered as supporting those who are viewed as having had their social reproduction impacted negatively by capitalism, with the transfers of public resources under social security/income transfer as necessary to support those experiencing precarity due to informality, low or inconsistent income (Boschetti and Behring, 2021, p. 79). More broadly, social work has visibly defended broader policy responses which encourage access to education, health care, sanitation and social protection and protection of young people through Child and Adolescent Statutes (Brazil, 1990). This latter legislation being crucially located at the intersection of various policies including that of health, education, social assistance, food security, although the Bolsonaro government at Federal level is now seeking to reduce these protections.

The return of retrogressive social policy

The 2016 political crises resulted in a presidential coup against the left-wing Dilma administration, which was followed by more right-wing governments. The election of Jair Bolsonaro in October 2018 created opportunities for considerable retrogressive social policy change. Should the government make good on all of its election promises, there will be further significant negative implications for Brazilian social security (Barbosa *et al.*, 2021). This is especially worrying, as Brazil has one of the worst levels of inequality in the world, the proposed reductions in expenditure will have the largest impact on the poorest in society, which often lack the resources to access health services, even if they could enforce their legal rights to health care (IPEA, 2016). Increased precarity has implications far wider than social policy. In 2010 Brazil had 7.3 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty (Lula's government), this had reduced to 4.7 per cent in 2015 (Dilma's government), although the rate was 6.5 per

cent in 2018 and 2020 (IPEA, 2020). The increased rates are a result of austerity promoted by the Temer government, such as the Constitutional Amendment number 95/2016 on Public Expenditure, labour reform and pension reform (see [Leal et al., 2018](#)). The subsequent right-wing administration has continued this policy of austerity.

Changes to Brazilian politics since 2019 have meant that in a country, which was previously subjected to right-wing dictatorship, which was followed by left wing administrations led by Lula and Dilma has once again a right-wing government (election of Bolsonaro and his Social Liberal Party), with socially conservative policies ([Ferguson and Garcia, 2019](#)). This populist political policy has used pro-military rhetoric, glorifying Brazil's bygone authoritarian military dictatorship, which only ended thirty-three years previously ([Ferguson and Garcia, 2019](#)). This has included military personnel serving in civil positions in the government (TCY, 2021), resulting in some critics (see [Nozaki, 2021](#)) to highlight that this presence in ministries, including education and health, should be seen within a context of retrogressive policy development and implementation.

Furthermore, the past two right-wing government administrations, namely Temer and Bolsonaro, have also established an agenda of economic reform, promoting mass privatisation, the proceeds of which are earmarked to be used for the reduction of public debt and radical fiscal adjustment. Many of the regressive reform proposals, such as Constitutional Amendment 95/2016, contradict Article 7 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, which promotes and protects the social rights of individuals, along with the rights of urban and rural workers ([Brazil, 1988](#)). The latter are especially important in a country such as Brazil, given its size and population concentration in rural and urban areas. For instance, proposals by the Social Liberal Party for new pension reform offers citizens a binary choice of having fewer social rights but with the possibly of higher employment, due to efforts to reduce social protection to stimulate the economy. Thus, the current administration offers the population both increased levels of fiscal austerity along with the loss of substantial social rights, both of which threaten the populations' living conditions, along with destroying the socio-economic and health achievements since the end of dictatorship.

The economic and political crises in Brazil are viewed within social work as a process which illustrates the limits of a government (Work Party) which tried to build a consensus between capital and the working class. As a result, the Lula government has been viewed by some, see for instance [Singer \(2002\)](#), as both progressive and conservative. In contrast, [Oliveira \(2006\)](#) views this as: 'Since then, a novel combination of neo-populism and party stratification, shored up by social-liberal hand-outs, on the one hand, and government graft, on the other, has helped

to forge a new form of class rule in Brazil that could be characterized as “hegemony in reverse”.

An example of austerity has been Constitutional reform (EC 95/16) which has imposed a freeze on social spending for twenty years, and these reforms affect programmes such as the Continuous Cash Benefit (Benefício de Prestação Continuada—BPC), the Bolsa Família programme (now ceased), the Unified Health System (SUS) and the Unified System for Social Assistance (SUAS) (Leal *et al.*, 2018). Further changes to health funding under constitutional amendment (EC95/2016) resulted in the 2019 health budget being capped 2018 levels. When inflation is factored (the Brazilian Consumer Price Index) at 4.39 per cent, this resulted in a 2019 budget shortfall of approximately R\$10 billion, in a context of rising health demand (Brazil, 2022). In 2022 the total value of the 2022 annual budget for the Unified Health System (R\$147.4 billion) is similar to that of 2021 and 5 per cent lower than the 2019 (Faria *et al.*, 2022).

The federal government is therefore viewed as destroying the SUS which provides care to around 70 per cent of the population (about 150 million people) (IBGE, 2020). The paradox being that whilst the SUS has been defunded, the same health system has been key in the Covid-19 crises. This has resulted in some critics such as Henriques (2020) describing the current situation as being a process of living a crisis within another crisis. The levels of mortality, human suffering and hardship with its inevitable psychological impact of fear, precarity and experience of extreme poverty have challenged the government to provide answers, which sadly to date appear to have gone largely unanswered for the most vulnerable.

Similarly, the SUAS was a key social policy through the Covid-19 crises for families living in poor or extremely poor conditions. The cash transfer system, Bolsa Família (part of SUAS), was originally established by the Lula government in 2003 and was one of the most successful income transfer programmes in the world, due to its high effectiveness in reducing poverty, inequality and low fiscal cost. It is attributed, for example, to helping to reduce infant mortality rates and increasing school attendance for children in vulnerable households. In 2019, Bolsa Família funding was withdrawn from almost 600,000 families out of the 13 million families who were receiving support, and who had a per capita monthly income of up to R\$178.00 (US\$32.96) (Ministerio da Cidadania, 2020). In April 2020, social assistance was further reduced to approximately US\$123 for a maximum of two people per family, although it could be doubled in the case of women heading up a single-parent family (between April and August 2020). However, in September 2020, the amount paid decreased again to US\$ 60.00 and then ended in December 2020. The Brazilian Institute of Economics of the Getulio Vargas Foundation, estimated

that reductions in Emergency Assistance aid, since September 2020, has led 7 million people to fall below the poverty line (income less than US\$5.50 per day) (FGV, 2021). The end of the programme in December 2020 resulted in millions more experiencing poverty, such that between January and March 2021, many families did not receive any cash transfer (with the exception of the previous Bolsa Familia Cash Transfer Program recipients). Consequently, around 67.8 million people received Emergency Assistance benefits in 2020, although 37.2 million were already recipients of the Cash Transfer Program (Garcia *et al.*, 2021). This resulted in around 30 million people being excluded from the Cash Transfer Program, with the Economic Minister stating that they were invisible people who had only emerged during the pandemic (Garcia *et al.*, 2021).

Following societal pressure, including from social work, further changes were made in March 2021, when the government reinstated the Emergency Assistance funding although having tightened the requirements and reducing the level of payment to between US\$27 (person living alone) and US\$68 (for women with children). Other changes limited the number of families supported to around 39.8 million people in 2021 against 68.2 million (2020) with the last revised programme (Garcia *et al.*, 2021). As a result, 28.4 million people have not received any support, resulting in many poor families, having to expose themselves to greater Covid-19 risk through not socially isolating or else face unemployment and hunger. Favelas Unified Central (CUFA), a non-governmental organisation supporting favela residents estimates that eight out of ten families living in the favelas require food donations each day in order to survive (Locomotiva, 2021).

A new social assistance programme called Brazil Assistance commenced in 2021 (Brazil, 2021). Social work through CFESS (2021) has criticised the new programme for its lack of engagement with those who administer the social assistance policy, along with those that deliver and manage the programme. CFESS have, furthermore, criticised the programme for falsely suggesting an expansion of provision and overlooking the austerity cuts that were being implemented through the Constitutional Amendment 95/2016, which prevented the expansion of social assistance programmes. This new programme is seen by CFESS as also undermining the social rights of citizens.

For CFESS, the new cash transfer programme has weakened (SUAS) along with the social protection system as a whole, deepening challenges of underfunding. The greater use of self-directed technology to claim social assistance, rather than relying on social workers with face-to-face contact, has also reduced access due to difficulties of claimants accessing and navigating the technology.

Emergency assistance during Covid-19

The pandemic in Brazil has magnified the existing precarity of many of Brazilian, especially the given gendered and racialised nature of the country. The Brazilian government pandemic response, along with others across the world, has deepened existing levels of inequality and highlighted that capitalism relies on households and existing exploitative models of social reproduction (Alston, 2020; Stevano *et al.*, 2021). This is perhaps best illustrated by who was able to work from home during the pandemic, family roles in securing education and care, the lack of wages in the provision of care and the impact on employment access. The predominant economic focus on 'productive' activity has enormous implications for the availability and production of care across society, and has resulted in the devaluation of the importance of well-being for those that provided care. Households have therefore increasingly borne the responsibility for 'welfare'" (Cooper, 2017), and government policy of withdrawing welfare support has often been accompanied by promotion of private provision in health and education resulting in families increasingly being responsible for this burden. Boschetti and Behring (2021, p. 76) highlight that the governments lack of support and imposition of austerity have further widened social inequalities, with those who were already precarious, or living in favelas without basic sanitation experiencing greater difficulties in accessing social protection. The number of families that were excluded of the Emergency Aid Assistance has reduced in 2021 by 8 per cent of families the last five months of the restarted programme of those who were now eligible under the new criteria (Nalesso *et al.*, 2021). The changes have resulted in an income programme disconnected from social protection systems like Brazil Assistance, increasing the uncertainty of the programme's structure, composition and value of benefits, along with the sources of funding.

Final thoughts: A call for solidarity in the use of a radical perspective

Brazil has long standing, but worsening, social and health inequality and remains in the midst of the global pandemic, the vulnerable including children and families continue to pay the price of austerity. Whilst the Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in one of the highest death tolls in the world, the price paid by children and their families due to inequality, loss of family and opportunity remains difficult to calculate, although social work continues to witness an unfolding disaster.

In seeking to explore those challenges for Brazilian social work, the profession should seek to embrace the complexity of the professions

analysis of their social reality, recognising that this perspective should be seen as the profession enacting its own indigenous theoretical model to analyse its reality. For Brazilian social workers, there is a recognition of the complexity and the interconnection between the coronavirus crisis, the ongoing political crisis and the imposition of retrogressive social and economic policies which have had a profound impact on the working class. These challenges have been exacerbated by the pandemic but are also rooted in the deep structural crisis of the economy and capitalism. Consequently, the profession, who are both part of and work to support the struggle of the working class, requires that all Brazilian social workers address the fundamental health, political and economic crisis. However, Brazilians are not alone, with many governments imposing austerity and seeking to change the relationship between citizens and the state requiring social workers to be concerned about the structural causes of inequality and social distress, requiring a national and global solidarity to seek to address these challenges within Brazil and other countries.

Globally, there are lessons for social work across world which has witnessed increasing austerity and retrogressive social policy (see for instance [Spolander et al., 2014](#)) becoming mainstream social policy responses, as a result of the intensification of neoliberal policies and ideology, in high-, medium- and low-income countries. Although the language used in different contexts by policy makers is often framed disparately for their local audiences, implementation of this reform is often lumpy and with contradiction. For many across the world their lives and living conditions have become more precarious, this creates concerns for society and for social work as a profession, especially as many of these problems require structural interventions. Without engaging in structural analysis, change and macro interventions, social work's interventions at micro level may be the equivalent of drying ice with a paper towel. The Brazilian model offers an opportunity for the profession globally, to consider and act to address these structural policy challenges rather than only addressing the consequences at an individual level.

To address these global trends, social work too needs to recognise that this challenge at the core and periphery of capitalism is both different and similar, and to seek international solidarity with other social workers, users of services, trade unions and civil society. This requires the widening and sharing of policy analysis and expertise, theorising and operationalising interventions and support debates on the impacts of policy regression on society. It is important too that academia contributes by enabling professional training in social policy, highlighting the economic links to social policies and their consequences, enabling professional agency and confidence to address these concerns collectively. Finally, social workers globally, in taking the lead from their Brazilian

colleagues, need to find ways to support communities to develop and maintain their skills and confidence to analyse, mobilise and demand changes from politicians.

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