

# Military firefighters: a gaze at the health and the violence related to work

*Bombeiros militares: um olhar sobre a saúde e violência relacionados com o trabalho*

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**ABSTRACT** This article aims to reflect about the worker health and work-related violence from the movement played by military firefighters in the state of Rio de Janeiro in 2011. The qualitative research, developed through the records of public events of the category, uses content analysis technique for processing and interpretation of the material. Results show that the workers demand decent working conditions. The violation of such right can be considered a form of violence in the workplace and negatively impact the health, life and the very occupation of the worker at stake.

**KEYWORDS** Violence. Firefighters. Occupational health. Workplace violence.

**RESUMO** O presente artigo tem como objetivo refletir acerca da saúde do trabalhador e da violência relacionada com o trabalho a partir do movimento protagonizado por bombeiros militares do Estado do Rio de Janeiro em 2011. A pesquisa qualitativa, desenvolvida por meio dos registros dos atos públicos da categoria, utiliza a técnica de análise de conteúdo para tratamento e interpretação do material. Os resultados apontam que os trabalhadores reivindicam condições dignas de trabalho. A violação desse direito pode ser considerada uma forma de violência no ambiente de trabalho e impactar negativamente na saúde, na vida e na própria ocupação profissional do trabalhador em questão.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE** Violência. Bombeiros. Saúde do trabalhador. Violência no trabalho.

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## Introduction

Who safeguards the life of firefighters? The public acts featured by workers of this category that struggles for the preservation of life constitute the main object of analysis in the present study. The core objective of this article is to reflect upon the health of workers and violence at work from the movement of the workers of the Military Fire Department of the state of Rio de Janeiro (CBMERJ), that occurred in 2011, which sought better working, health and life conditions of these professionals.

The movement emerged through an apparent precarious situation in the work environment experienced by this category of workers. The precariousness of work continuously becomes a social problem for several areas, among them, the health of the worker (EDERHRDT; CARVALHO; MUROFUSE, 2015). In the Brazilian context, the loss and violation of labor rights intensifies this scenario that affects different professional categories and can be understood as a form of violence.

In Brazil, work is circumscribed as a right in the Federal Constitution of 1988 in its 6th article (BRAZIL, 1988). However it is not guaranteed that it is performed in healthy environments or in conditions that respect other constitutional rights, such as health and dignity, both important components for the field of the worker's health and provided by law.

In the case of military firefighters, the scientific literature indicates that a wide range of diseases has been manifesting in this category as a result of their work activities. According to Pires (2016), these workers are developing musculoskeletal, circulatory system diseases and mental and behavioral disorders. The latter, according to Franco, Druck and Seligmann-Silva (2010), can be attributed to a precarious work environment.

Can the negative repercussions on the health of firefighters be affected by the violation of rights in the work environment? It is observed that, in the series of manifestations

and public demonstrations, the workers mainly claimed a fundamental constitutional right of the human being, which is dignity. For firefighters, this is linked to better working conditions, transcending the salary issue, that is, covering health and its relation to the exercise of the work activity.

## Methodology

It is a qualitative study, developed from the technique of content analysis for the interpretation of the material. For this purpose, were used, as source, the historical requests records of the organized collective of firefighters of the state of Rio de Janeiro made available in two virtual pages. The electronic addresses (SOSBOMBEIROS, 2011; SOSBOMBEIROS RJ, 2012) function as a dissemination instrument of the pleading and public acts of the category started in 2011.

It is highlighted that the article is the result of a work of completion of course of the Specialization in Worker's Health and Human Ecology, held in the year 2013. The research developed did not have any type of financial support, moreover, there was no conflict of interest. Since it deals with secondary data, there was no need for evaluation by an ethics committee.

In relation to the methods, a content analysis proposed by Bardin (2011) was used. The author affirms that this type of technique is a set of methodological instruments increasingly subtle in constant improvement, that apply to 'speeches', and its objective is the description and interpretation of the contents of the messages. In the face of the historical data of the military firefighters workers' movement that will be presented, it is believed that this methodological procedure is applied in a relevant way for the understanding and interpretation of the obtained material.

Minayo (2014) emphasizes that content analysis is the most common expression

used to refer to the treatment of qualitative research data, however the author emphasizes that this methodology is much more than just a technical procedure, it is part of the historical, theoretical and practical trajectory of the field of social investigations.

## Results and discussion

### A brief historic of the firefighters' fight

According to the Military Firefighters' Statute (RIO DE JANEIRO, 1985), the specific duties of these professionals are: fire prevention and extinguishing services, search and salvage services, providing assistance in floods, landslides and catastrophes, among others. The work activities of the category are essential for the maintenance and balance of life in society.

From april 2011, the workers of th CBMERJ have performed numerous public manifestations in favor of decent working conditions. The marches gained volume, intensity and became constant. The public acts also had wide popular support, one of them, moreover, had an airplane that flew over the beachfront of Copacabana carrying a banner saying: "Firefighters ask for help, population we need you!" (SOSBOMBEIROS, 2011).

The organized workers' collective of the institution set up a requesting agenda, through which they requested resources for the execution of their activities, such as: individual protection equipment, better working conditions in the workplaces and rescue stations for sea rescuing with better infrastructure; they also requested the end of the bonuses, an initial minimum salary of R\$ 3,500.00, a single career plan, transportation allowance of R\$ 350,00, meal allowance, base date and a code of ethics in line with the Federal Constitution of 1988.

The category agenda is broad, its items

permeate the individual, collective, structural/organizational/functional, economic and social spheres present in the instances of the work of the firefighters, suggesting that their activities occur in an inadequate environment and favorable to health damage. According to Franco *et al.* (2010), the process of precariousness is multidimensional and, therefore, affects the lives of workers inside and outside work.

On June 3, 2011, there was another public act in front of the Legislative Assembly of Rio de Janeiro (Alerj), where the mobilized workers walked to their Central Unit. Faced with the absence of a governmental or institutional representative, the collective of workers chose to force entry the unity; the place was surrounded by police officers from the Special Operations Battalion (Bope), which after a night of unsuccessful negotiations invaded the Central Fire Station. The episode culminated with 439 workers arrested, as reported in print, television and online media.

In February 2012, an act occurred in Cinelandia that brought together firefighters, military police and civilians; in a assembly, the workers of the three institutions decreed a strike. Once again, Bope's police officers were present, and the episode ended with 12 firefighters and 3 military police officers arrested and taken to the Bangu I Penitentiary accused of being the leaders of the movement.

A few days after the fact described above, a change in the institution regulation facilitated the internal procedures for the investigation of 'crimes' committed by its military, this way, the 12 firemen arrested were expelled from the institution. From that day, the workers have engaged to revoke the punishment.

The episode of the Central Fire Station and the Cinelandia had international repercussions. Throughout their fight trajectory, firefighters have achieved some victories in the financial field with the payment of

transportation allowance in the amount of R\$ 100,00 and a bonus of R\$ 350,00 which will be incorporated into the salary by the end of 2017. In the functional field, the category could withdraw the military from the institution of Emergency Care Units (UPA) – a fact that allowed them to return to the barracks to exercise their final assignments – and also managed to reduce the time for professional progression, this latter can generate a salary increase.

Agreements with other state agencies were established, and, against payment of a gratification, firefighters who volunteered could work as drivers and fire brigades in hospitals, for example. A program was also created to reinforce the workforce for the firefighter, voluntarily, to work in units of the institution with reduced headcount, receiving, for this, a gratification. This fact made it possible for many workers with delayed holidays to enjoy this right (SOSBOMBEIROS RJ, 2012).

Have the changes accomplished by the State brought positive results in the health-work-illness relationship of the category? Since most the measures adopted by the government were in the economic sphere, it can be assumed that it increased the financial security and the purchasing power of the workers in the category in question. However, extra services, even if voluntarily such as the above, represent an intensification of work, a fact that can provide different types of illness.

The mobilization of the firefighters through the popular acts made possible several historical events for the category. On July 7, 2013, the organized collective inaugurated the Association of Military Firefighters of the State of Rio de Janeiro (ABMERJ), which, even newly created, fights for the rights not only of firefighters, but also of military police officers. In October of the same year, the category obtained a new conquest: the excluded workers have been reintegrated to the Fire Department.

In the 2014 elections, the category could

elect a Corporal as a federal deputy and a Major as a councilor. These, in turn, have the mission to fight for the stabilizing of a working environment more adequate to the specificities of the activities of the military firefighters. The election of such candidates was able to provide the strengthening of the category and its organized collective. Moreover, through social control, workers were able to participate in a propositive way in the mandate of their representatives.

In the face of the protagonism of the military firefighters in the trajectory of their movement for better working conditions, health and life, the episodes experienced by the category are characterized as a real struggle for the health of the worker. It can be noticed a new chapter in the history of this institution that is more than 160 years old and participates in countless important moments of the construction of the Country.

It is worth noting that the brief history presented here contemplated the information contained in the two sites (SOSBOMBEIROS, 2011; SOSBOMBEIROS RJ, 2012) of disclosure of the movement. It is observed that the claims highlighted in them are in the sphere of the health-work-illness relation and constitute an important object for the analyzes of the health field of the worker.

### **Worker's health: a field in defense of rights**

Work, throughout history, has had countless meanings. Its development was of fundamental importance for the construction of the human societies. For Marx (2008), its relationship with man is dialectical, because as the worker transforms the raw material of nature into a product that has meaning and value at the same time, it transforms and gives meaning to his work activity.

The health-work-illness relation has been the object of the study of man since the seventeenth century, in which Berdinado Ramazzini has been a forerunner on the

subject. Currently, studies dedicated to this field can be found in Gracino *et al.* (2016), among others; however, the understanding of the work in non-degrading conditions as a human right was hardly achieved.

There is the origin of the labor law in England during the period of the industrial revolution. At the time, the working time was very extensive, activities were painful and the factory environment insalubrious. This situation caused several accidents and deaths putting the growth of industrial production at risk. It is in this context that the employment contract emerges whose purpose was to preserve the development of production by the extending the life of workers to guarantee the workforce (VASCONCELLOS, 2011).

The health of the worker is an area that according to Gomez (2011) incorporates disciplines of other areas of knowledge, such as: epidemiology, ergonomics, engineering, sociology, psychology, administration, among others, and therefore constitutes a field of knowledge.

The health of the worker aggregates [...] a wide spectrum of disciplines. As an own knowledge field of the collective health, it is composed by the tripod epidemiology, administration and planning in health and social sciences in health, as well as auxiliary disciplines such as demography, statistics, ecology, geography, anthropology, economics, sociology, history and political sciences, toxicology, production engineering and ergonomics. (GOMEZ, 2011, P. 25, FREE TRANSLATION).

The field was inspired by the Italian Worker Model (IWM), which emerged in the 1960s and had as characteristic the protagonism of the workers and their unions in the defense of health, that is, the protection of the workers' health was not delegated to the owners of the factories.

The active participation of the worker, the knowledge and their autonomy made possible, little by little, the construction of the

concept of non-delegation, whose meaning implies not delegating to the traditional and instituted technique and to political-institutional management the right to control the conditions of the work environment. (PAIVA; VASCONCELLOS, 2011, P. 387, FREE TRANSLATION).

In Brazil, it is possible to mention as remarkable facts of its construction that brought together professionals from the health area, intellectuals of the academy and diverse segments of workers: the Health Reform Movement, the I National Health Conference and the first Worker Health Programs.

For Mendes and Dias (1991), the health of the workers surpasses the practices of work medicine and occupational health, because in it workers are not understood as objects of intervention actions; they are formulators, managers and protagonists of the interventions that aim at ensuring the care, protection and care of their health.

For Vasconcellos (2011, P. 409, FREE TRANSLATION), this field of knowledge

invokes the right to health in its unrestricted spectrum of full citizenship, typical of fundamental civil, economic, social and human rights, to which other rights are subordinated.

Health for this area is understood as a fundamental right that goes beyond the existing limits in the work contracts. The health of the worker is legitimized in the Federal Constitution of 1888 and has the Unified Health System (SUS) as the main stage of the effectiveness of its actions.

By thinking about the historical trajectory of the field of workers' health and the actions performed by the military of the CBMERJ, it is noted that both seek the guarantee of the conditions necessary for the preservation of health in the work environment. In this way, it is believed that the ideology of the IWM is present in the struggle of these workers: "Health is not sold or delegated: it defends itself" (PAIVA; VASCONCELLOS, 2011, 388), therefore,

the episodes related to the firefighters can be characterized as a movement in defense of the workers' health.

### Reflections about work-related violence

There are different discussions about terminology that integrates violence and work. Some authors mention the category of violence at work, others appropriate the description of violence at work and violence related to work. The main divergence occurs due to violence related to the work environment or the worker's own function. Oliveira and Nunes (2008) consider violence related to work and describe as follows:

[...] as any voluntary action by an individual or group against another individual or group that causes physical or psychological damages, in the work environment, or that involves relations established at work or work-related activities. It's also considered as violence related to work all forms of deprivation and violation of fundamental principles and labor and social security rights; neglect of working conditions; and the omission of care, help and solidarity in the face of some misfortune, characterized by the naturalization of death and illness related to work. (OLIVEIRA; NUNES, 2008, P. 30, FREE TRANSLATION).

The thematic on violence has been gaining more visibility and bringing concerns in the last decades. In Brazil, according to Minayo and Souza (1999), it is in the 1980s that this theme comes with greater emphasis in the health field, seeking greater consolidation in the 1990s. Regarding the external causes of morbidity and mortality that are in the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), accidents and violence occurring in the workplace are also a public health problem.

The literature emphasizes the importance of thinking about the aggravations resulting from accidents and violence at work due

to their seriousness about the population. Machado and Gomez (1994, p. 74) include the

accident as a form of violence imposes on the worker's health area new relations within Public Health, as well as disciplinary and sectoral interfaces.

The authors mention the magnitude of mortality as a result of work-related violence in society, emphasizing the precariousness of recognition and registration in information systems.

Therefore, reflecting on the accident-violence-work relationship is crucial to consider strategies in defense of the health of the worker. In relation to the manifestations of the military firefighters studied here, it is perceived that the fight was mainly for the sake of their health and rights. For the revendicating movement, dignity is directly related to fundamental human rights, including work with conditions that do not have negative impacts on the workers' health. These principles are enshrined in the Federal Constitution of 1988, reinforcing the understanding that these rights and conditions must be guaranteed in the workplace.

It is considered the definition of violence addressed by the World Health Organization, as

use of physical force or power, in threat or practice, against yourself, another person or against a group or community that results in or may result in suffering, death, psychological damage, impaired development or deprivation. (WHO, 2002, P. 5, FREE TRANSLATION).

The history of comings and goings of the military firefighters in searching improvement in the resources of work reveals the possible dramas of the category in its work practice that is understood here as a suggestive picture of work-related violence.

The safety, health and well-being of professionals as aspects pertaining to the development of the institution should be

considered in the broader approach of the causes of work-related violence (WHO, 2002). So that thinking about the improvement and enlargement of the workers' health is also to prevent violence in the workplace, in order to establish a work environment that does not cause damage to the health of those who perform their work activities.

Military firefighters constitute a category of workers that struggles to save lives, so they need the best possible working conditions to perform their work satisfactorily. The scarcity or limitation of basic resources for labor practices are elements that can generate negative impacts on the health and life of professionals in general, so this precarious situation in working conditions is established as a form of violence related to work.

## Final considerations

The analysis of the requesting agenda of the military firefighters suggests that the category has working conditions with structural, environmental and socioeconomic problems. This framework can have negative effects not only during its activities, but also cause injuries in all instances involving its health and life as mentioned. It should be noted that the episodes of the military firefighters in a specific period and place were addressed, so the phenomenon observed may not occur or be different in institutions with the same purpose in other locations in the Country.

The literature on the health situation of the work-related category is still small in the Country. Despite this, some studies such as that carried out by Monteiro *et al.* (2013) and Lima, Assunção and Barreto (2015) point out that workers in the Fire Department of other states face health problems that may be related to their work activities. In this way, the need to deepen the theme is identified, that is, the conduction of an exploratory study in which it is possible to hear

the points of view of these professionals and the institution.

The context of scarcity of material, structural and socioeconomic resources in the daily life of several professional segments, whether formal or not, can affect the physical and psychological health of the workers, providing the appearance of chronic, psychosomatic diseases, as well as accidents at work and other grievances. This scenario denotes the importance of a look at working conditions and their interface with the health of the workers.

The requesting movement of the professionals sought to reduce factors that jeopardize their health in the work environment. Such conditions can be characterized as violence at work and trigger physical, psychological damages and even death. The journey accomplished by the firefighters was for the realization of a work that is not synonymous with illness, its mobilization was for the realization of the right to health in its broad and unrestricted sense, the category fought for the realization of the founding right of all others, the of human dignity.

## Contributors

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