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The hard and precarious work of São Paulo municipal funeral workers during the COVID-19 pandemic

O trabalho duro e precarizado de trabalhadores(as) do serviço público funerário paulistano durante a pandemia de COVID-19

Abstract

Introduction: the São Paulo municipal funeral industry is one of the biggest in Latin America. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the municipality, particularly in 2021, broke record numbers for deaths and burials. This scenario had major repercussions for public servants of the municipal funeral agency. **Objective:** to understand working conditions and situations in São Paulo municipal funeral workers during the pandemic, observing its repercussions on work activity and occupational health. **Methods:** this exploratory qualitative research conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 participants who were contacted by accessibility criteria and linked to different work activities from two cemeteries and a funeral agency and labored in-person during the pandemic. **Results:** the pandemic worsened the existing precarious working conditions and situations. Participants claimed an emotional burden related to working activities and a feeling of being professionally devalued. **Conclusions:** work in the funeral industry is a complex activity that requires specific knowledge, much of it regarding care work, despite the evinced precarious working conditions and the feelings of professional devaluation.

Keywords: work; mortuary practice; COVID-19; occupational health.

Resumo

Introdução: o sistema funerário público paulistano é um dos maiores da América Latina. Durante a pandemia de COVID-19, a cidade de São Paulo, particularmente em 2021, bateu recordes de óbitos e sepultamentos. Tal situação repercutiu significativamente no trabalho desenvolvido pelos servidores públicos vinculados à autarquia. **Objetivo:** esta investigação objetivou conhecer as condições e situações de trabalho de trabalhadores do serviço funerário municipal paulistano no contexto pandêmico, observando suas repercussões na atividade laboral e na saúde de seus(suas) trabalhadores(as). **Métodos:** a pesquisa, de abordagem qualitativa, exploratória quanto aos objetivos, fez uso de entrevistas semiestruturadas. Contou com 16 participantes, contatados por critério de acessibilidade, vinculados a diferentes atividades laborais, lotados em dois cemitérios e em um polo administrativo, que trabalharam presencialmente durante a pandemia. **Resultados:** como resultado de pesquisa, observou-se a acentuação de condições e situações de trabalho precarizadas preexistentes, mas agravadas pela pandemia. Constatou-se recorrente indicação de carga emocional relacionada à atividade laboral, assim como sentimento de desvalorização profissional. **Conclusão:** destaca-se o fato de ser uma atividade laboral complexa, que requer saberes específicos, muitos deles associados ao trabalho de cuidado, ainda que se evidencie, nos depoimentos, a precarização das condições de trabalho e o sentimento de desvalorização profissional.

Palavras-chave: trabalho; serviço funerário; COVID-19; saúde do trabalhador.



Introdução

During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many professional categories were unable to adopt remote work as a health protective strategy. Focused on these workers who performed their activities in person, the research “COVID-19 as a work-related disease” was developed, linked to the Department of Public Health at Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, Botucatu campus, SP. This investigation aimed to primarily gather and organize data on work in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its qualitative stage also aimed to understand the conditions and situations of work in specific categories, as well as the incidence of COVID-19 among workers engaged in in-person professional activities.

The research findings in this study stem from an investigation conducted with workers in the funeral service sector in São Paulo that belonged to the aforementioned main project and benefited from the collaboration of representatives from the Union of Municipal Civil Servants of São Paulo, with whom a Technical Cooperation Agreement was signed.

The choice of the funeral service sector was motivated by a combination of factors. The first of them relates to the centrality of funeral activities and their exacerbation during the pandemic. São Paulo, particularly in 2021, experienced consecutive records of deaths and burials. At times, night shifts were instituted at the main municipal cemetery, Vila Formosa. The second factor, inseparable from the others, concerns the nature of the work performed and the exposure of these workers to environments with higher circulation of the virus and infected individuals. A third factor relates to knowledge about working conditions prior to the pandemic stemming from labor precarity.

Considering this framework and research scope, this study aims to understand the working conditions and situations of workers in the São Paulo Municipal funeral service during the pandemic, observing their repercussions on labor activity and workers' health.

In addition to this introduction, the article is organized into six sections. The first briefly describes the methodological procedures of this research. Subsequently, the labor context and aspects related to labor precarity and the pandemic context are addressed. Following this and in dialogue with the interviews, issues related to the two mentioned thematic categories are discussed. Finally, this study offers its concluding remarks.

Methods

From the standpoint of methodological procedures, this qualitative exploratory research used semi-structured interviews. The interview script, in addition to common questions addressed to different segments within the main project, included questions related to the activity in the sector. Among other issues, the following were considered: the nature of the work performed; specific conditions and situations of work; changes observed in the activity during the pandemic and their objective and subjective repercussions; the attribution of meaning; and the identification of forms of recognition, or lack thereof, of the work according to workers' perspective.

Participants consisted of individuals affiliated with the municipal funeral service of São Paulo who, due to the nature of their work, performed activities in person throughout the pandemic. The selection of interviewees was based on accessibility criteria (including participants performing various job activities), all of whom were permanent employees. The final composition was determined by the number of available accesses (limited by the pandemic) and the saturation of the obtained information. Despite efforts to include outsourced workers, the team was unsuccessful.

A total of 14 interviews were conducted involving 16 individuals (in two instances, the interview had dual participation), including six women and 10 men. They were stationed in two cemeteries (one with tombs and another with gardens) and one administrative center. In terms of roles, four participants are gravediggers, one is a mourner, one is a gatekeeper, one is a driver, six perform administrative tasks, two work in the warehouse, and one works in the urn dispatch.

The interviews were conducted from May to July 2021, a period in which the death curve began to decline after its peak in March and April. The category had also gained access to vaccination. Only one interview was conducted virtually; the remaining were carried out at the workplaces. To avoid identification, the names of the interviewees were changed.

To analyze the results and inspired by the analysis via cores of significance¹, the team constructed thematic categories. Initially, an individualized and floating reading of the transcribed interviews was considered aiming at familiarization, appropriation, and the construction of a set of provisional themes. A new reading observed recurrence of themes, emotional charge, and expressions used in the collected reports; apparent contradictions in each interview and between them; identification of aspects; and convergent and divergent perceptions. At this stage, comparisons were also adopted when necessary between participants' reports and information provided by the professional association, official documents, and press reports. The set of preliminary themes, systematized in light of the objectives of this research, defined the analysis categories, among which are those addressed in this study.

The article thus shows a subset of the broader research results. Prioritizing, therefore, the presentation of aspects related to the following thematic categories: a) emotional burden of the performed activities and b) meanings of work and their repercussions on mental health. The research "COVID-19 as a work-related disease" was developed linked to the Department of Public Health at Universidade Estadual de São Paulo, Botucatu campus, SP. Certificate Presentation to Ethics Assessment (Certificado de Apresentação de Apreciação Ética [CAAE]): 37219820.0.0000.5411. Committee of Ethics in Research (Comitê de Ética em Pesquisa [CEP]): 4.290.745.

Results and discussion

São Paulo funeral system: labor context and pandemic

The municipality of São Paulo has 22 municipal public cemeteries operating from 7 am to 7 pm. Burials take place from 8 am to 6 pm. In addition to cemeteries, the system comprises a crematorium in the Vila Alpina neighborhood (which operates continuously) and administrative units.

In 2000, according to its union representatives, funeral services had 2,200 permanent workers. However, this number has been regularly decreasing. The last public tender for the sector took place in 2012. Since then, both outsourcing and privatization have advanced and permanent employees have aged. According to the Institutional Performance Commitment Evaluation, in 2017-2018, 70% of those hired by public tender were aged from 50 to 70 years². In the first half of 2021, the system had 830 permanent workers and about 1,300 outsourced employees³.

In March 2020, with the declaration of a pandemic by the World Health Organization and the occurrence of the first deaths recognized as related to COVID-19 in Brazil, labor activity in the São Paulo funeral service gained greater visibility. In April, according to a report by the G1 Portal, 13 thousand graves were opened in the capital cemeteries. Its burial capacity increased to "400 per day," surpassing a "historical daily average of [...] about 240" burials during the summer and about 300 during the winter⁴.

The changes brought about by the pandemic exacerbated the pre-existing labor precarization. In the case of the São Paulo funeral service, in addition to the tensions related to an activity centered on death and mourning and professional devaluation, workers began to more acutely feel the lack of replacement of permanent staff, the intensification of outsourcing activities, sector privatization, low access to personal protective equipment, and forms of discrimination associated with working in the pandemic.

From a general perspective, the advancement of labor precarization took global relevance in the 1970s-1980s. It unfolded from changes in the pattern of capital accumulation, the advancement of neoliberalism, and processes of work and production reorganization⁵. In Brazil, these changes gained strength in the 1990s and manifested themselves in the daily work life in various forms, including diversification and flexibilization of contractual ties (including outsourcing); adoption of management models to increase productivity and work intensity (with the adoption of versatility, multifunctionality, performance evaluations, and goal achievements); and reduction or loss of previously

acquired rights. The advancement of precarization processes thus impacts work dynamics both objectively and subjectively, harming workers' health⁶⁻⁸.

According to Druck et al.⁹, these changes gained greater relevance in the public sector from 1995 onward under Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration. The State adoption of managerial models from the private sector finds a central role in privatization and outsourcing processes, both inseparable from the advancement of labor precarization and evinced by this research.

A hard and emotionally demanding job

The notion of hard work, as in Bernardo's¹⁰ research, arises from interviewees' accounts of the conditions and situations they experience in their daily work. Thus, they describe funeral service work, especially in burial and body transportation activities. The interviews also highlight another characteristic attributed to the work as a whole: being surrounded by a strong emotional burden.

In one account, Vinicius, a driver at a garden cemetery, initially alluded to the simplicity and repetitiveness of his tasks. He then highlighted what he called the "depression of the job," an activity that, according to him, emotionally shakes him not because of contact with death, but rather due to the interaction with grieving family members and their various emotional responses. He emphasized that becoming used to these situations is unrelated to coldness since everyone carries "a little bit" of it within themselves.

Carmen, a gravedigger at a garden cemetery, highlighted the emotional and affective involvement related to burying children. She mentioned questioning the meaning of their "passage." Other authors¹¹ have also noted this greater emotional burden in children's burials.

A study linking the daily activity of funeral service professionals and death observed that these workers constitute a segment under significant physical and psychological vulnerability, "prolonged stress situations," and circumstances that facilitate burnout, such as recurrent social and financial devaluation, workload overload, and lack of sufficient materials to properly perform their activities⁴.

The emotional burden referred to by the interviewees deeply resonates with the nature of the work carried out (involving care) and the specificities of the funeral sector and the public to which part of the activity is directed, namely, grieving family members.

Soares¹² points out the multiple dimensions that characterize care work: a physical one, required in the mobilization of the body; a cognitive one, implicated in the knowledge of what is being performed; a sexual one, also observed in what Hirata and Kergoat¹³ refer to as the sexual division of labor; a relational one, which demands qualifications often invisible but necessary for interactions with the recipients of work, such as the ability to control one's own emotions; and an emotional one, which involves, among other facets, managing emotions directed toward those for whom the work is intended.

Many workers, according to Vinicius, try to deny the existence of this burden, stating that dealing with bodies resembles dealing with any other object. This defensive strategy in the face of the potential suffering from contact with death refers to the movement identified by Souza and Boemer, whose research found that funeral workers seek to "demystify" their activity, describing it as "normal" or "like any other"¹⁴.

According to Vinicius, the rationalization of work situations, which aims to eliminate triggered emotions, tends to translate, for some colleagues, into the use of drugs, the habit of consuming alcoholic beverages, among other resources. Seligmann-Silva¹⁵, discussing the relation between work and alcoholism, stresses its connection to concrete work situations. He highlights, among other aspects, the incidence of alcohol consumption among those who perform "socially discredited activities," such as those of the so-called "dirty work," which involves a lack of recognition that goes beyond the work itself, affecting those who perform it.

Flores and Moura¹⁶, in their research with funeral agents, found that over 60% use licit substances (alcohol and tobacco) and controlled medication. Rodrigues et al.¹⁷ point out that the lack of space for expressing or releasing feelings related to the exercise of their functions seems to contribute to a higher rate of mental distress and abusive alcohol use. These findings resonate with the perspective that considers the health-disease process as a result “of an unequal correlation of powers imposed on work and on the worker” (p. 136)¹⁵. Seligmann-Silva, in advancing the formulation on mental strain at work, emphasizes “the disadvantage that causes the worker’s body and psychic potentials to be consumed by the work process and constraints linked to it” (p. 136)¹⁵.

Carmen, a tenured gravedigger who has also worked in administrative roles, emphasizes that some of the funeral service employees, especially those who work more directly in the cemeteries, perform a type of work that cannot, to a large extent, be shared with their families. According to her, they spend decades living with the tears and suffering of others. This movement of isolating work experiences from family life as trying to avoid its effects, is noticeable in Marília’s account, a funeral attendant:

the employee today... [starts to cry]... they endure. [...] It’s not easy. You come; you see everyone wearing masks. [...] People often say that the civil servant... that the public employee is very bad, right? But sometimes it’s a mask [figuratively speaking] that we have to put on. [...] Because otherwise, we can’t take it. How do we manage to come home every day like this, right? [points to herself, emphasizing that she’s crying].

Letícia, from the urn dispatch department, talks about everyday situations that often mark her memory and that of her colleagues, impacting their mental health. She reports the activity carried out in the funeral service:

it starts with picking up the body. It’s not just a whole body; it’s a body falling apart. [The] driver does all that work. Then he goes to the morgue [Instituto Médico Legal (IML)], open it up, and it’s just like that, and you have to go in there and grab it. You put on a glove and deal with it. Put it in the car, in the coffin, all shattered, and take it to the cemetery. That smell... it all gets impregnated in your body. You shower, but it’s still there. You don’t have a psychologist... Imagine living a horror movie every day. And then you have your personal problems at home. Are you Superman?

The environment of the funeral service, already described as ‘heavy’, became ‘disturbing’ during the pandemic, according to Marília. This sensation is attributed to the reduced contact of family and friends with the deceased person and the lesser possibility of processing the loss. In times of increasing deaths, she describes that the call for service became based on numerical tokens, accentuating the dehumanization and loss of identity of the deceased.

Vinícius, on the other hand, highlights the intensification of work experienced during the pandemic period “in all areas of the funeral service, including administration,” expressed in the practice of accumulating tasks throughout the workday. He mentions the situation observed in a garden cemetery that:

there is only one employee serving the population for exhumation [...]. She closes the exhumation service at 3 p.m. and starts with the registries on the computers, but she can’t keep up.

Beyond the intensified physical and emotional burden of work, another factor emerges as relevant to the suffering of workers during this period: increased discrimination. Research in this sector has shown that the devaluation and discrimination against funeral service workers lead to mental distress^{10,15,18}. Funeral work is part of what can be called “dirty work,” as mentioned earlier, and is based on:

in the way certain professions handle waste, garbage, bodily fluids, excrement, or human remains. The concept encompasses jobs with little or no social prestige and visibility or, when it exists, it is a negative view. (p. 273)¹⁹

It is also necessary to highlight that the same society that creates jobs considered “dirty” is the one that deprives its professionals of social interaction, stigmatizes them, and discriminates against them. This occurs primarily due to the social division into “good work/bad work” – with the gravedigger, for example, being seen as a “dirty” worker, falling into the latter category. (p. 275)¹⁹

In the case of this research, some workers describe the perception of reactions of fear or astonishment from people when they see them wearing work uniforms in public transportation. Some point out the presence of the stigma of “slacker,” often attributed to public servants.

The interviews recurrently referred to the relation between the stigma attributed to funeral service workers and the lack of education of the population about death and/or the avoidance, for cultural reasons, of the topic, contributing to make the work invisible and neglected. Carmen emphasizes that, in the category, it is gravediggers who suffer the most professional devaluation and prejudice. According to her account,

A gravedigger who's in the administrative part [...] doesn't want to leave because there's the stigma of undervalued work. Sometimes, he doesn't even say he's a gravedigger. He says he works in administration, but his actual, original role is as a gravedigger.

Augusto, an administrative worker, reports the intensified discrimination during the pandemic due to working on the so-called “frontline.” He reports that he noticed friends, acquaintances, and family members starting to avoid him out of fear of contracting the virus.

Another interviewee, Pedro, highlights the paradoxical and contradictory aspect of the essential nature of the activity, which was emphasized in the pandemic. According to him, what seemed to indicate valorization that would provide some “advantage,” in practice, aimed only to keep the work functioning. Nívea, from the administrative sector, emphasizes the relation established between essential workers and people linked to health care, excluding those who bury or remove the deceased.

Regarding the increased exposure of funeral service activity in the pandemic, perceptions of discrimination vary as a result of regular media coverage. Some interviewees believe that increased exposure facilitated negotiation of certain working conditions, such as access to vaccines. Others claim that negative representation persists, highlighting shortcomings and failures in the service in a contextualized manner, disregarding the lack of investment, overload, and precarious working conditions.

Seeking meaning in work

According to Ashforth and Kreiner²⁰, people in professions considered “dirty” develop close relationships as a protective strategy against discrimination. Pedro, who works in an administrative department, evinces this perspective. According to him, the camaraderie in the department during the pandemic became closer, with each colleague looking out for the other: “when someone doesn't show up, [we] call and ask what happened.” Regarding his work, he finds it gratifying because he knows he is “doing something for someone” and “for himself,” and that is the sense of essentiality he attributes to his work.

Despite devaluation and discrimination, work in the funeral service appears as a source of meaning for some workers. Marília, a funeral attendant, describes her profession as a “gift from God.”

I love working in the funeral service. [...] I still remember when I started as a gravedigger. When I put on the blue uniform, I cried because I thought: wow, what a privilege! To be a civil servant and work in a place where I can, whether I want to or not, pour myself out. Pour love into people's lives, have empathy... And come every day and understand life.

Letícia emphasizes how, over the years, her work and her contact with death have influenced the way she sees the world. Adelson, from the administrative center, establishes associations between his activity and his religious belief, also highlighting his personal growth from his work.

I think the public can understand that the funeral service is an essential service, it's a tough service, it's a laborious service. It's heavy, it's hard to live with families crying over losing a father, losing a mother, losing children. It's a very painful job. But [...] for me, it's very rewarding. I am proud to work in the funeral service. I think God prepared this place for me, to come and grow as a person, as a human being, and to be worthy, right? And to break many taboos.

As interviews showed similar strategies to those found by Batista and Codo²¹, as related to the redefinition of the activity based on its sanctification and a notion of “doing good” or reframing work by focusing on the affective skills developed in the reception of family members. Letícia describes a strategy in this investigation that differs from that pointed out by Batista and Codo²¹, resembling Adelson's report, which redefines work based on a change in perspective on life.

It is also noteworthy that the activity in the funeral service is marked by a know-how developed over the years, often transmitted across generations by family members, reflecting the persistence of a notion of craftsmanship particularized in service activities. Clot argues that it concerns the “execution and meaning of action” that intertwines with the “life of the other”²².

This situation tends to contribute to these workers recognizing themselves, to some extent, in their work. This process, as observed, is strongly linked to the relationship established between those who work in cemeteries and the families of the deceased.

Letícia, who works in the urn dispatch department, expresses this connection by describing the emotional skills developed throughout her career. She states that they have made her more empathetic and sensitive. Regarding this know-how, there is an understanding of work that incorporates a relationship of care for others, which goes beyond notions that reduce work activity to “manual labor.” According to Carmen,

Suddenly you're in a heavy manual labor job. You're not going to show any signs [...] of being worn out. You'll take a deep breath and talk to the person. [...] You'll give them the plot number or the block number where [their family] member was buried because the cemetery is huge. [...] Some people just glance at the paper and don't read it. Sometimes they even throw it away. So, you have to inform them: "Here is the plot number; in 3 years you can come back for the exhumation; there's an ossuary; you have the option of cremation later." [...] Suddenly someone says, "Go talk to the family," and you're all sweaty, out of breath. Then you say, "Take this paper, it's yours, take it with you." You have to understand what's going on. What information needs to be conveyed.[...] You'll take a deep breath to talk to the family, right?

A porter at the administrative hub, Antônio, who worked for many years in the removal of bodies for burial, describes this activity by highlighting the expertise developed in his daily work routine. He emphasizes the necessary care with the body, conducting the work in a way to alleviate the suffering of the family members who are dealing with the loss. He also highlights the emotional skill of avoiding involvement in the feelings of family members.

These testimonies agree with Fraga²³, which focuses on the care provided by workers in carrying out their activities with meticulousness and respect for the bereaved. According to the author, “we are faced with workers who often assume the role of caregivers for people, for grieving families, and for the deceased, providing the family with the opportunity to cherish good memories” (p. 54)²³. Other authors also stress this aspect, such as Souza and Pretto²⁴.

Some English-speaking countries used the term “deathcare workers,” which means “workers of death care” or “caretakers of death,” which is appropriate considering the knowledge developed and described by the interviewees. It is this knowledge, application, and preservation that shed light on another important source of suffering for the interviewees: outsourcing.

The know-how in the face of the advancement of precarization

The know-how developed over the years (the social memory of the work²²) tends to dissolve amidst the advance of outsourcing and the increasingly frequent high turnover in the public service. Carmen, when discussing the time for exhumation and the care that must be taken with family members, emphasizes that “perhaps the [outsourced] employee does not know, does not have this knowledge, this experience” that is acquired due to the time spent in the role.

The interviewees also report experiencing greater discrimination among outsourced workers. In addition to the stigma of “dirty work” that permeates the activity, they face, according to Vinicius, hostility from the regular employees, and are also assigned the heaviest tasks.

This perspective, of a division of labor between permanent and outsourced workers, is also noted by Carmen. According to her, the outsourced workers who operate the cemetery plots have taken on tasks considered “more manual,” such as digging graves, even though this activity has been assisted by mini excavators during the pandemic. Permanent employees, on the other hand, tend to primarily focus on burials and exhumations, occasionally assisting digging graves. This division is facilitated by the numerical imbalance between permanent and outsourced workers, with the latter being more numerous and younger.

This discrimination also manifests itself in more subtle ways. Osvaldo, from the administrative sector, points out that the strategies to reduce the spread of the virus in the unit in which he works, include distancing from outsourced workers, who seemed to be more exposed to the disease due to their activity of removing bodies.

However, the criticism from the interviewed employees is directed much more toward outsourcing and what it represents for the public service than toward outsourced workers themselves. Part of the understanding about the need to preserve the service in the sphere of public administration highlights the commitment that permanent employment entails both in terms of service provision and the professionalization of activities.

Ivo, a gravedigger assigned to the Tomb Cemetery, criticizes the fact that outsourced workers often lack the technical or practical knowledge to perform the work, requiring experienced and permanent gravediggers to teach them. Tarcísio, also a gravedigger, reinforces the importance of public tenders, indicating that it ensures the verification of the minimum prerequisites necessary for the job. He also highlights the high dropout rate among outsourced workers stemming from the psychological impact caused by their work.

Deepened in 2017, with the approval of Law N° 13,429 by the National Congress, labor outsourcing in cemeteries is part of cost-cutting mechanisms and labor flexibility. It is a type of hiring that enables a high turnover of service providers and workers. According to Carmen, this dynamic is an obstacle to a commitment to public service, as well as to learning a professional activity that is unable to be reduced to repetitive work.

The interviews also showed a common feeling among workers of defeat, loss of work references, or even expulsion in the face of the accentuation of outsourcing processes during the pandemic, facilitated both by increased workload demands and the removal of permanent workers over 60 years of age and with comorbidities. They also show the precarization of work, which assumes various objective and subjective dimensions. According to Druck²⁵, it is a social process that “modifies the conditions of the previously hegemonic (stable) wage labor” (p. 43), fragmenting the forms of connection, making them more unstable, and hindering the organization and resistance of workers. These processes intensified in the pandemic, indicating processes of mental strain¹⁵.

It is no wonder that the elements pointed out by Franco, Druck, and Seligmann-Silva⁸ appear in the interviewees’ statements, such as intensified work, loss of individual and collective identities, work-related illness, among others. This overall scenario, termed by the authors as the “psychopathology of precarization,” refers to

processes of domination that blend insecurity, uncertainty, subjection, competition, proliferation of distrust and individualism, hijacking of time and subjectivity. [...] Social destabilization and vulnerability lead to symbolic devaluation, with the erosion of the value system, self-image, and representations of one’s place in the social structure. (p. 231)⁸

For Marília, a funeral attendant, “soon this will privatize, and I won’t have this place to be anymore. [...] It’s like I’m being taken out of my own home. That’s what I feel, that with the COVID [...] issue, we’ve been taken out of our own home.” Antonio, a doorman at the administrative center who has also worked as a funeral service driver, describes a similar feeling of loss, stating that the category fought hard to keep the service “up and running” and suffers to see it “falling apart” over time.

The participants in the research mostly expressed being in a situation in which they use their practical knowledge to train outsourced workers and facilitate the development of activities while witnessing the end of their own work.

Conclusion

The funeral service emerges, in this research, as a complex job, with various burdens demanding specific knowledge.

The interviewed workers point to discriminatory processes, intensified by their integration into the so-called “frontline” of the pandemic combat, despite no forms of recognition or reward for their efforts, dedication, and sacrifices.

Therefore, if their work was already considered “dirty,” COVID-19 redefined this notion, linking the activity to a supposed higher exposure to a little known and potentially lethal disease. This implies a marginalization in which basic working conditions, such as personal protective equipment and vaccination, are only acquired by the organized struggle of the category.

Interviewees also reported the deepening, during the pandemic, of the dismantling of the meaning of work by the advancement of outsourcing, hindering the construction and maintenance of the memory and knowledge produced by the category, making the workers more exposed and vulnerable to wear and illness due to the various burdens that integrate their work process.

It is important to understand funeral services as a care job integrated with health care and emergency planning in the municipality, with sufficient resources for the safe conduct of activities considering their various impacts on workers’ health.

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