The street as a workplace: the situation of delivery drivers via apps

A rua como local de trabalho: o caso de entregadores via aplicativos

La rue comme lieu de travail : la situation des livreurs par l'entremise d'applications

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ABSTRACT
The study presented in this article examined the work context of apps delivery drivers taking into account the problems aggravated by the covid-19 pandemic such as the fact that the work is carried out on the street, the scrapping of labor rights, and the precariousness of their working conditions due to the phenomenon of uberization. The results reveal negative impacts on the biopsychosocial health of these delivery drivers, highlighting a drop in remuneration and a increased exposure to the virus. Among these impacts, the increase in psychopathological processes as well as the fear of the imminent possibility of contracting the coronavirus and contaminating their social support network are the most visible. Thus, it is concluded that the covid-19 pandemic combined with policies to scrap labor rights have influenced the biopsychosocial health of these workers, pushing them to the margins of formal employment and intensifying the uberization process related to this informal work model.

Keywords: Urban spaces; Labour legislation; Informal work; Work precariousness; Worker’s health.

RESUMO
O estudo apresentado neste artigo investigou o contexto em que se dá o trabalho de entregadores via aplicativos, levando em consideração problemas agravados pela pandemia de covid-19, tais como: o fato de ser realizado na rua, o sucateamento de direitos trabalhistas e sua precarização com o fenômeno de uberização. Os resultados apontam impactos negativos na saúde biopsicossocial desses entregadores, evidenciando uma queda da remuneração e uma maior exposição ao vírus. Dentre os impactos, destacam-se o aumento de processos psicopatológicos, além do medo em relação à iminente possibilidade de contrair o coronavírus e contaminar sua rede de apoio social. Desta maneira, conclui-se que a pandemia de covid-19, aliada a
políticas de sucateamento dos direitos trabalhistas influenciam diretamente a saúde biopsicossocial desses trabalhadores, empurrando-os para a margem do trabalho formal e potencializando o processo de uberização relacionado a esse modelo de trabalho informal.

Palavras-chave: Espaços urbanos; Legislação trabalhista; Trabalho informal; Precarização do trabalho; Saúde do trabalhador.

RÉSUMÉ

L’étude présentée dans cet article a examiné le contexte dans lequel des livreurs par l’entremise d’applications travaillent, en tenant compte des problèmes aggravés par la pandémie de covid-19, tels que: le fait que le travail soit effectué dans la rue, la supression des droits du travail et sa précarisation causé par le phénomène d’ubérisation. Les résultats indiquent des impacts négatifs sur la santé biopsychosociale de ces livreurs, montrant une baisse des rémunérations et une plus grande exposition au virus. Parmi ces impacts, attirent l’attention l’augmentation des processus psychopathologiques, de la même manière que la crainte de la possibilité imminente de contracter le coronavirus et de contaminer leur réseau de soutien social. Il est conclu que la pandémie de covid-19 combinée aux politiques de suppression des droits du travail influent directement sur la santé biopsychosociale de ces travailleurs, en les poussant en marge du travail formel et en renforçant le processus d’ubérisation lié à ce modèle de travail informel.

Mots clés : Espaces urbains ; Législation du travail ; Travail informel ; Précarisation du travail ; Santé du travailleur.

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INTRODUCTION

The social phenomenon of precarious work has existed since the emergence of capitalism in the 18th century, however, it has recently been aggravated by reforms in labor legislation (Brazil, 2017). These reforms, driven by neoliberal policies, led Brazil to move towards a scenario of labor relations that favors employers and reduces the level of working conditions offered, resulting in outsourcing and strengthening the uberization process.

According to Franco and Ferraz (2019), the uberization phenomenon refers to Uber, a North American app-based transportation company, which began operating in Brazil in 2014 and comes from capital accumulation. In the process in question, the worker becomes responsible for the main means of the productive activity and the company is exempt from any responsibility, both with the delivery worker and with the product or service being offered. It only provides the application as a way of intermediating the relationship between client and worker, who is not recognized as such, as they do not have any employment relationship.

Therefore, this study aimed to answer the question: what were the effects that the covid-19 pandemic brought to the lives and work activities of apps delivery workers? It is believed that a possible hypothesis is that delivery workers using apps were already suffering from the precariousness of work caused by the uberization process itself and by political neoliberalism that led the country to undergo reforms in labor legislation, which resulted in increased unemployment and extreme need for a minimum guarantee of subsistence, problems that, combined with the pandemic, caused biopsychosocial losses in the lives and work activities of app delivery workers.

From this scenario, it becomes important to understand the context of these delivery drivers, who are at the mercy of companies that do not recognize the proper employment relationship, continue to exploit their labor, and profiting before and even more so during the pandemic. Therefore, this study sought to investigate the biopsychosocial impacts on the lives of apps delivery workers, identify aspects of the uberization process, and the aforementioned phenomenon of precariousness. Moreover, the study analyzed the scenario of the precariousness of rights as a result of recent changes in labor legislation reflected on the context in which these delivery men work, who have the street as their place of work.

To carry out the study, a literature review was conducted mainly through bibliographic research on two portals. Between January and May of 2023, searches were carried out in the CAPES and Scielo Periodicals Portal databases relating to articles published from 2008 to 2022. The used descriptors were: informal work, precarious work, uberization, worker health, articles in Portuguese, monographs, technical notes, legislation, informative data from the Ministry of Health, and the CDC (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

The inclusion criterion was the fact that the material encompassed the theme and objectives of this study. The exclusion criteria were articles that did not fit the theme or were not directly related to the topic discussed and repeated articles. The studies that make up the literature review are divided into the areas of psychology, administration, economics, law, social management, public health, nursing, politics, and legislation.

THE STREET AS A WORKPLACE

In the historical process of building cities, according to Macêdo (2019, p. 53), “artistic and cultural practices and expressions, codes, life strategies, processes of recognition and belonging were setting the tone in the creation of cities”. In this scenario, the street can be appropriated as a place of passage, leisure, artistic/cultural expression, violence, popular demonstrations, abandonment, or work. Therefore,
it is complex and plural, hybrid in its constant movement of construction and reconstruction. Moura and Scocuglia (2016) add that streets are intended for different purposes in addition to the circulation of cars. They contain the socio-spatial experiences of citizens who appropriate them. As Certeau (2008, p. 202) had already stated: “thus, the street geometrically defined by urbanism is transformed into space by pedestrians”, who intertwine their life stories in it. João do Rio (2007, p. 44), pseudonym of João Paulo Emílio Cristóvão dos Santos Coelho Barreto (1881-1921), raised questions on this subject at the beginning of the 20th century considering the bureaucratic definition of the street in dictionaries: “For them, just a line of facades where you walk through the towns”. And then he proposed his definition of the street:

The street is more than that, the street is a factor in the life of cities, the street has a soul! In Benarres or Amsterdam, in London or Buenos Aires, under the most diverse skies, in the most varied climates, the street is the shelter of misery. The unfortunate ones do not feel completely without help from the gods while before their eyes a street opens into another street. The street is the applause of the mediocre, the unhappy, the miserable of art [...] The street is generous. Crime, delirium, and misery do not denounce them. The street transforms languages [...] The street continues to kill nouns, transforming the meaning of terms, imposing the words it invents on dictionaries, and creating the slang that is the classic heritage of future lexicons. The street sums up all human comfort for the civilized animal. It gives you light, luxury, well-being, comfort, and even wild impressions in the fluttering of trees and the chirping of birds (Rio, 2007, p. 26).

From this perspective, public spaces in general, and streets specifically, become objects of investigation from the most diverse perspectives, as they are considered “par excellence, the stage for various citizen manifestations, whether political, cultural, or religious, they are spaces of interaction; and therefore, they retain the historical and social value of urban life” (Macêdo, 2019, p. 111). In increasingly complex societies, the street has been seen as a space for socialization, at the same time as it has become a place of work.

As such, the street is configured in a specific and differentiated way concerning other places of work, such as commerce, industry, or service companies. Some aspects relate to the lack of a physical environment, such as that existing on the production line, in the office, or the store; others refer to the lack of direct contact with co-workers and superiors; and also the impossibility of accessing a bathroom, cafeteria, or rest area during the workday. Such scenarios about the work context of app delivery workers are discussed below.

WORKING CONDITIONS FOR APPS DELIVERY WORKERS

The field of work is going through transformations, such as the adoption of neoliberal policies that have been gaining strength in Brazil, the recent changes in labor legislation, and the process of uberization and its precariousness in working conditions; these are all circumstances that directly reflect on the daily lives of app delivery workers.

We know that the precariousness of the Brazilian job market long predates the covid-19 pandemic. Its roots are established, nevertheless, in our socio-historical specificities favoring the creation of a labor market that has always been marked both by high informality and low remuneration and by inequality of access to the few conquered and legally-established rights (Praun, 2020, p. 2).

From the perspective of Praun (2020), it is noted that this work model with high levels of informality is not new in Brazil, and therefore it aligns with an important point in this study, given that this phenomenon becomes fundamental to understanding the deepening of neoliberalism and uberization experienced in the country.

Regarding the uberization process, Oliveira (2020) and Braga (2020) reported that it was driven by the creation of a neoliberal scenario and changes in labor legislation, which boosted the context of informal work and outsourcing, generating benefits for businesspeople and neglecting working class labor rights. Lemos,
Ohofugi, and Borges (2020) point out that, in addition to neoliberal policies, technological advances also drove app-based service companies to spread in the labor market, generating a new mode of occupation, which they call digital slavery. This is in line with Durães (2020) and Abílio et al. (2020), who state that the capitalist system has become more complex but work continues to be used within the spectrum of exploitation, through sophisticated and digital exploitation. Fonseca and Pessoa (2022) consider that the way the hiring process and the operation of companies that offer services via app work highlights the attempt to ensure that the exploitation of the delivery workforce is not accessed by any legal protection for them.

Durães (2020) points out that “the neoliberal prescription of a minimum state, wage cuts, austerity, and low state participation in the economy proved to be ineffective” (p. 362) in countless nations, and it was necessary to “step back and inject money to contain the wave of unemployment and economic collapse” (p. 362). Hence, Braga (2020) considers that labor informality, in which these apps delivery drivers are inserted, is directly linked to the appropriation of work from poorly organized categories that are collectively more vulnerable, which leads to a working class deprived of social security without legal support and responsible for the work instruments themselves. Moreover, Oliveira (2020) points out that this situation of vulnerability, related to this work structure, results in the over-exploitation of workers.

According to Durães (2020, p. 362), “the neoliberal logic defends the fantasy that everyone can conquer their space, individually, even from unequal contexts (individuals and peoples)”. In this way, it can be seen according to the author, that the neoliberal fantasy ideal appears to be ineffective in Brazil because inequality is so present, indicating that conquering individual spaces involves broader and more complex factors than the commitment itself.

The fact that we will highlight is that the neoliberal prescription of a minimum state, wage cuts, austerity, and low state participation in the economy proved to be ineffective. Numerous nations, so-called ‘developed’ or ‘powers’, had to step back and inject money to contain the wave of unemployment and economic collapse. This happened with the greatest economic power in the world (United States) and several other European countries (Durães, 2020, p. 362).

Thus, it is noted that, in several countries around the world, state aid and support for the economy is essential. When analyzing the large portion of the Brazilian population that works informally, the scenario becomes extremely delicate because these issues in Brazil are of fundamental importance for the maintenance of basic rights, which have been historically neglected and which, amid the pandemic were aggravated by actions and omissions from the federal government (Braga, 2020) of that period. According to Oliveira (2020), the policy with a neoliberal bias favored the context of uberization with direct consequences on the lives of delivery workers through applications, already linked to flexibility and privatization and having led to processes of legislative changes such for example, the most recent changes to labor laws.

Legislative reforms are also seen as causing negative implications in the context of app delivery workers as they have altered and made previously achieved rights more flexible. According to Druck, Dutra, and Silva (2019), the 2017 labor reform, approved through Law 13,467/2017, has great support in the construction of the image of the worker as “self-entrepreneur” (p. 299); however, according to Oliveira (2020, p. 6), “these workers cannot be considered as ‘self-entrepreneurs’ because they do not exercise any innovation or creativity in their work, nor do they design a ‘business plan’ in which they have autonomy on the prices of their services.” In other words, the 2017 labor reform helped to build the idea of freedom and autonomy for these workers, which, in reality, did not favor them, it only increased the rates of insertion of people into the informal market, scrapping labor rights, generating exorbitant profits for companies, and neglected working conditions for this part of the population.
Brazil has faced a scenario of high unemployment rates, according to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2021), which reveals that 14.3 million Brazilians were unemployed that year. The uberization process takes advantage of this scenario to insert this part of the population into the informal market. According to Oliveira (2020, p. 4), “workers see app companies as the fastest and most accessible form of economic insertion” leading to a significant increase in the number of delivery drivers inserted in this uberized context.

Braga (2020) states that the precariousness arising from neoliberal policies and the flexibilization of work itself, through the uberization process, place the worker in the context of the informal market. According to data from IBGE (2020), this informality has become the main source of employment in 11 Brazilian states. In this context, workers via apps have a false sense of freedom, exempting companies from responsibility for any adverse situation faced on the street such as loss or theft of their work equipment (motorcycles, backpacks, packages, etc.), accidents, and illness among others. Luna and Oliveira (2022) state that, while app delivery workers are on the streets, companies can control both their working time and movement.

Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020) consider uberization as a setback concerning previously conquered political-social achievements citing its distancing from the constitutional conception of decent work. This problem impacts not only the recognition of the employment relationship but all the rights that this relationship would bring such as paid weekly time off, vacations, the thirteenth salary, paid sick leave, and overtime among other rights that app delivery workers are deprived.

Machado, Giongo, and Mendes (2016) point out that the absence of a labor relationship is directly linked to the loss of rights and benefits, marking a rupture in the alliance established between market society and the welfare state. In this sense, the loss of rights impacts the well-being of these workers, favoring conditions of vulnerability and biopsychosocial risks.

Uberization is linked to mediation carried out by various digital platforms that connect service providers to consumers, articulating the data generated by both parties in this interaction. Thus, there is a new type of work management in which information about workers’ times and movements can be recorded in detail through algorithms designed by the platform. Consumer evaluation will also be a source of data for this control of time and movement and, equally, to certify the quality of the service provided. In uberization, the multitude of consumers generates information for the control and evaluation of the multitude of workers (Oliveira, 2020, p. 3).

In this context of uberization, in addition to being separated from social security and labor protections, apps delivery workers still pay for their own working tools and the maintenance of these tools, which makes their work even more precarious.

THE HEALTH OF APPS DELIVERY WORKERS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

According to the Ministry of Health (Brazil, 2021), covid-19 is an acute respiratory infection caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, potentially serious, highly transmissible, and globally distributed. Until October 2021 in Brazil, it affected more than 21.7 million people and led to more than 606 thousand deaths. The covid-19 pandemic has exposed app delivery workers to imminent risks of contamination, both themselves and their families, due to the lack of necessary social distancing. This characterizes a life or death struggle for this group of workers for whom isolation proved to be an unfeasible practice.

The covid-19 pandemic is considered the most severe viral respiratory syndrome since the H1N1 influenza pandemic in 1918 (Ferguson et al., 2020 apud Schmidt, 2020) and has brought several transformations in the family, social, and work scopes. One of these changes has been the significant increase in online shopping which, according to Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020), occurred due to the policy of social
isolation and the mandate for self quarantine, which caused part of the population to remain at home; given the risk of contamination, many people used delivery and online shopping apps to purchase products without leaving home.

Amid the pandemic, as if by magic, home office and remote work spread with the promise, in many sectors, that these forms of work were here to stay. App delivery services have become essential, without the essential rights involved in working relationships being recognized (Praun, 2020, p. 4).

As a result of this significant increase in demand for online shopping, in addition to unemployment and lack of job opportunities, the number of apps delivery workers increased during this period and has been growing ever since. However, according to a survey carried out by the Labor Reform Studies and Monitoring Network (REMIR-Trabalho, 2020 apud Lemos; Ohofugi; Borges, 2020) with delivery app drivers in 26 Brazilian cities in April 2020, 60.3% of those interviewed reported a drop in pay.

Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020) and Abílio et al. (2020) indicate that, currently, the demand for deliveries through the use of applications and the number of workers inserted in the context of uberization has increased significantly; however, despite this increase, there is an observable drop in remuneration reflecting a competitive situation, and leading these workers to spend even more hours exposed to risks on the streets.

In the pandemic context, Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020) and Abílio et al. (2020) point out that apps delivery workers were unable to stay at home, being exposed to the virus daily; these related companies had no effective response regarding safety and health measures for these workers and did not provide safety equipment against covid-19. According to Praun (2020), the government of that period and the business community also tried, via MP 927 - article 29, to prevent the characterization of coronavirus contamination as an occupational disease.

During the context of the pandemic, neoliberalism concepts strengthened and further reflected the idea of freedom in the workplace, reinforcing the concept that delivery app workers are entrepreneurs in their own right. This model is considered an alternative to existing social problems, however, highlighted by the covid-19 pandemic. According to Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020, p. 121), “the destruction of the neoliberal capitalist economy resulting from the pandemic has a direct impact on social dynamics and, consequently, issues relating to work, health, and the environment are highlighted”. This flexibilization of labor laws has placed app delivery workers under inhumane working conditions, being exposed to the risks of contamination daily and without even having any recognized employment relationship.

According to a report by Bond (2020) for the news channel Agência Brasil, apps delivery companies grew considerably during the pandemic; the survey showed that, in the first month of the pandemic alone, purchases made through delivery apps grew by 30%, a number that continued to increase over the subsequent months generating exorbitant profits for these companies. While labor rights are being scrapped placing these delivery drivers in inhumane working contexts, companies made a lot of profits during the pandemic.

In the context of the scrapping of rights amid the pandemic, Praun (2020) points out that, at that time, the government and business owners in Brazil tried to declassify the coronavirus as an occupational disease, through MP 927, article 29 (Brasil, 2020), to remove the fulfillment of rights guaranteed to these workers who became ill due to exposure in their workplaces from their obligations, exempting companies from their labor responsibilities.

According to Moraes (2020), app delivery workers are exposed to risks of contamination and can also bring the virus into their homes putting their own families at risk without having the right to isolate themselves and receive any remuneration. In this sense, according to Oliveira (2020), political neoliberalism,
recent reforms in labor legislation, and the context of uberization combined with the covid-19 pandemic have proven to be a problem that directly impacts the biopsychosocial health of these delivery workers.

Silva, Oliveira, and Fontana (2011) and Silva et al. (2008) highlight that apps delivery workers are often subjected to long working hours, carry out their activities under constant time pressure from customers and the apps companies, and are also exposed to physical, chemical, ergonomic, biological, mechanical, and psychosocial pressures that can increase the risk of accidents. Due to the increasing number of these workers, consequently increasing competition, they are working longer hours a day to get an income that meets their needs, hence, often subjecting themselves to risks such as traveling at high speed to deliver faster and achieve a high number of deliveries, which exposes them to a greater likelihood of accidents. According to research by the Ministry of Health (Brazil, 2019), for every ten consultations related to accidents carried out in the SUS, eight involve motorcycles.

Furthermore, changes in the family routine due to restrictions arising from the pandemic, such as social distancing for example, can also have an impact on the psychological well-being of these delivery workers because there is a constant fear of perhaps taking the virus home and contaminating family members. According to Moraes (2020), the increase in stress levels observed in subjects during quarantine is directly related to the decrease in social interactions and movement restrictions during the pandemic, reflecting on the mental health of these individuals.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020) indicated several consequences caused by stress arising from the covid-19 pandemic such as feelings of fear, anger, sadness, worry, numbness, or frustration; changes in appetite, energy, desires, and interests; difficulty concentrating and making decisions; difficulty sleeping or with nightmares; the occurrence of physical reactions such as headaches, body aches, stomach problems, and rashes; worsening of chronic health problems; worsening of mental health conditions; and increased use of tobacco, alcohol, and other substances. In addition to the somatization processes to which the app delivery worker is exposed due to the pandemic, the fact of needing to work exposing themselves to several other risks, such as the risk of accidents and contamination with the virus, worsen their condition, health, and performance at work.

The outbreak generated by covid-19 brought psychological and emotional repercussions to the population, which can be explained by the great fear of falling ill, becoming unemployed, being helpless and socially stigmatized if they become infected, and, finally, the fear of dying (Lima et al., 2020, p. 7).

According to Lima et al. (2020, p. 7), “the deep sense of uncertainty regarding the economic and educational future also has implications for mental health”. In this sense, delivery drivers suffer daily from various uncertainties, such as “how much will they receive for that day’s work?” and “how many deliveries will have to be made to cover expenses and have some source of profit?” among many other uncertainties that directly impact the mental health of delivery workers.

Abílio et al. (2020) found that 62% of apps delivery drivers worked more than nine hours a day during the pandemic, sometimes working up to fifteen hours a day every day of the week without vacation or paid weekly rest. This work overload, according to Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020, p. 126), can lead the worker “to physical and mental exhaustion”, which can trigger diseases such as depression, attention deficit disorder, and burnout syndrome.

According to Lemos, Ohofugi, and Borges (2020), there is a risk of unequal contagion; the physical risks faced by apps delivery workers are greater as this work does not allow for the remote model, causing these workers to be daily exposed to risks. As for the psychological damage during the pandemic, authors observe that there is existential damage because this type of work deprives the subject of the process of self-realization in addition to diluting boundaries between time and space for individual life, which can cause
profound suffering and conditions of illnesses and mental illness due to the deprivation of leisure, rest, and socialization. Moreover, this working context can also be a trigger for pre-existing illnesses or new conditions such as those already mentioned: depression, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, and burnout syndrome.

Moraes (2020) points out that the pandemic caused an increase in the level of stress and fear, loss of sleep quality, irritability, anxiety, changes in appetite, possible abuse of alcohol and drugs, and changes in the quality of interpersonal relationships.

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

This study carried out a literature review to investigate the biopsychosocial impacts on the lives of apps delivery workers during the covid-19 pandemic. The results showed that changes in recent labor legislation contributed to leveraging neoliberal policies, the context of outsourcing, the increase in the number of workers inserted in the informal market, and the context of the uberization of work. Furthermore, they also contributed to the scrapping of labor rights and decent working conditions, placing many workers in contexts in which they are cut off from previously achieved security, rights, and benefits, constituting a setback for the working class.

With the covid-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in the number of apps delivery workers enhancing the competition for deliveries and causing these workers to work longer hours every day to make increased numbers of deliveries aiming at getting sufficient remuneration to meet their basic needs, which quite often was not achieved. This leads to high levels of stress and exposure to physical and psychological illnesses. Another aggravating factor arising from the pandemic was the daily exposure to the virus due to the high number of hours spent on the streets and the number of people they come into contact with throughout the working period. In addition to the risk of contracting the virus, the probability of infecting family members or other people generated feelings of fear, irritability, and worry.

The stress to which these delivery drivers are exposed can cause various harm to their health such as anxiety, symptoms of depression, burnout syndrome, fear, and insecurity among others. During the pandemic period in question, social relationships were also affected, with social isolation as the responsible factor. Therefore, family relationships became different and required adaptations in different contexts. The fact that these workers work on the street, are exposed to traffic risks and do not have a working support structure also contributes to a decline in their quality of life.

Thus, it is clear that the context of uberization and the process of scrapping labor rights, combined with the covid-19 pandemic, cause biopsychosocial problems in the lives of apps delivery workers who are not recognized as workers by these companies. This conception comes from the neoliberal concept and the fallacy of “being your own entrepreneur”, causing illnesses not only due to the possibility of contracting the virus but also due to harmed psychological and social aspects in the current scenario.

In general, the hypothesis contained in this study was confirmed because the worsening health of delivery drivers, combined with the context of the covid-19 pandemic, directly influenced the lives and work of these individuals. The scrapping of their rights and the daily struggle for survival sublimate the need for quality of life and mental health.

Finally, the present study found that the current situation of mental health and labor rights have been scrapped for a long time in Brazil, showing that it taking a more attentive and humanized look at this phenomena, such as uberization and the scrapping of labor rights is urgent. It is also necessary to propagate the public debate together with scientific studies, so that the scrapped spectrum and its psychopathological consequences do not become increasingly larger and, therefore, enhancing the chance to prevent more workers from becoming sick and reflecting troubled biopsychosocial relationships in the name of their neoliberal freedom.
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