

LABOUR, HEALTH AND TRADE UNION ACTION IN OFFSHORE OIL ACTIVITY AT THE CAMPOS BASIN, IN THE STATE OF RIO DE JANEIRO

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Abstract

This text briefly describes some of main factors associated to living and working conditions and risks to health and safety of workers aboard offshore oil platforms at Campos Basin. We also focus on issues related to a subjective dimension of work, emphasizing confinement. The theoretical methodological reference is based in materials coming from activity ergonomics and psychodynamics of work in an ergologic perspective. We understand that current context needs a substantive change, due to the fact that countless serious and critical accidents continue to occur. A broad debate must be established among representatives of large companies operating in the sector, workers trade unions and public power. In face of this adverse circumstance, biggest challenge is to develop means and strategies to make this debate become concrete advances.

Keywords

Work, health and safety, offshore oil platforms, confinement.

Introduction

In the first part of this paper we will briefly describe some of main factors associated to living and working conditions and risks to health and safety of workers aboard offshore oil platforms at Campos Basin. In the second and among multitude of elements therein present, we will emphasize aspects related to labor's subjective dimension, enhancing confinement in exploration and production units. We understand that within scope of debate regarding relation health and work in oil sector, the so called subjective dimension going beyond the confinement issue deserves special trade union action attention.

After the explosion in 2010 of an oil platform in the Gulf of Mexico, and Frade oil spill at Campos basin in 2011, subject in question of this paper was again evidenced because of the explosion at the Cidade de São Mateus FPSO (floating production storage and offloading vessel) off the coast of Espírito

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Santo, Brazil in February 2015, where 9 fatalities occurred and 26 workers were injured, some of them seriously. In a recently published FUP² (Single Oil Federation) newsletter, and according to the statement of some workers of BW - the company which chartered the vessel³, gas leak was something chronic and known by the manager of the unit and Petrobras inspectors. One of the injured workers would have been victim (without issue of CAT – work accident report) of another leak in the same pump house, on December 20, 2013, and even then there would have been no intervention to solve gas leak. The newsletter also informed that trade union will denounce the fact to Labor Public Attorney's Office, suing managers for professional negligence.

This kind of serious accidents are not new in Brazilian oil activities, as attest the oil spill at Guanabara, Rio de Janeiro in 2000 which caused serious environmental damages, and the explosion followed by sinking of oil platform P-36 at Campos basin in 2001, with 11 fatalities and listing of P-34 at Campos basin in 2002, causing serious damages and forcing 25 workers to jump into the sea. Regarding offshore platforms, going back in time, we can also mention the accident with a platform at Enchova, Campos basin in 1984, where 37 workers died.

In a deeper research⁴ following the line of present paper, our theoretical-methodological "toolbox" includes materials coming, mainly from following texts: *Ergonomia da Atividade - Activity ergonomics* (WISNER, 1994; DANIELLOU, 2004; FALZON, 2007) *Psicodinâmica do Work - Psychodynamics of work* (DEJOURS, 1993; 2008), and in an ergologic perspective (SCHWARTZ, 2000; SCHWARTZ; DURRIVE, 2010). Adopting this "ergologic view" enabled to explore what previous approaches offer as do-it-yourself possibilities, or "warp", as Schwartz (2000) prefers, in an effort of synergic routing between science knowledge and practical experience, related to the analysis of situations at work.

The employed methodological contributions favored a better approach to the real work (DEJOURS, 1997)⁵, and therefore to lag between dimensions of the prescription and what was really done. We did this through direct and indirect methods, with workers participating in discussions, capitalizing their experience accumulated along the years, their know-how and associated attributes to knowledge arising during activities. This approach allowing expansion of the analysis of working situations beyond more visible aspects helped us to access what is "inside the job" (WISNER, 1997) and face some elements shaping its enigmatic dimension. We tried to operate with mechanisms boos-

2 FUP – Single Oil Federation Primeira Mão newsletter number 1173 (05 to 12 March 2015).

3 Petrobras charters the ship and entire crew, under the responsibility of the referred company, to operate in its name.

4 Related to the project "Work, health and safety in offshore oil industry, under my coordination and professor Denise Alvarez, from UFF. This project is an extensive research effort, and up till now it received external support from Faperj, Capes and the Northern Fluminense region oil workers union trade - Sindipetro-NF – headed at Macaé (RJ), with whom we had a systematic dialogue.

5 According to Dejours (2008, p. 352), real part of work "is known by its resistance to submit to knowledge and different ways of knowing-doing".

ting the relation between scientific knowledge and experience, having as principle “mutual callings” between them, putting together a mix of intellectual discomfort and epistemological humility (SCHWARTZ, 2000).

We are looking to act by making an effort to mobilize an “expanded research community” or CAP⁶ (BRITO; ATHAYDE, 2003) – where a dialogical community runs (FRANÇA, 2007) – incorporating “direct researchers” (project coordinators), the “trade union group” (claimant) and a “group of directly interested workers” (contacted through trade union management) besides an “indirect researcher” (with a different academic training and verifying the research without direct and systematic field participation)⁷ during greater involvement periods. Such initiative of expanded research community can be seen as an attempt to walk a path like the one adopted by Schwartz (1999), in line with what this author named three poles dynamic device (3PDD) when he realized it was necessary to advance regarding proposal developed by Ivar Oddone, - an Italian physician, forerunner of occupational health - named “expanded scientific communities”. This concept could raise expectations that science would be “expanded” and paradoxically, allow the outshine of possible knowledge not limited to the scientific field, besides hiding difficulties concerning a proposal including in its core dialogue a partnership between professional researchers and several main characters of world of work, coming because of its investigative curiosity. However, Schwartz (1999) highlights the legacy of the Italian worker model of production of knowledge and struggle for health (ODDONE et al, 1986) as main heritage for the analysis of work in the lineage of activity ergonomics.

To achieve attempt mentioned in previous paragraph – mobilization of a “expand research community” – we organized workshops with workers: “meetings on work” (SCHWARTZ; DURRIVE, 2010) an important part of the research material we used as the basis for this paper. In total, we organized 12 “meetings”, in affinity with the expanded research community proposal, whose members (not always the same) performed different tasks in offshore oil exploration and production activities. We also used other methodologies as “primary sources” in surveying and production of our research data⁸, throughout the project: direct verifications in platforms, ships and airports (air terminals used for transport of workers); activities (seminars, congresses etc.) with participation of trade union representatives and researchers; and individual interviews (20 in total), in which we always tried to establish a climate and a “chat” dynamics with our partners.

6 More recently, the expression has changed to CAPI (expanded research and intervention community).

7 In a partnership with professor Milton Athayde, from PPGPS/UERJ, institution where I made my post-doctoral thesis between 2005/2006, as scholar from Faperj, under the supervision of Milton Athayde.

8 For a broader and more detailed presentation of these procedures, see Figueiredo’s book introduction (2012).

Work, health and safety in offshore oil platforms

When describing oil workers activities in refineries and maritime terminals, Ferreira and Iguti (2003) ensure detailing four of main specificities of this work: danger, complexity, continuity and collective dimension. We think these are also fundamental characteristics for offshore platforms workers activities. Not because considering a platform as an oil refinery on the high seas, vision going back to starting operation at Campos basin, – “the beginnings”, as some oil people say –, but because we have seen such aspects also appearing in pronounced manner in studies on offshore work, like those of Choueri (1991), Pesanha (1994), Rodrigues (2001) and Leite (2009), for example.

Ferreira and Iguti begin discussion on this subject mentioning aspects related with danger involved in this activity: the high risk to what workers are exposed. This is why some oil workers testimonies associate refineries and platforms with “bombs” or “powder kegs” who can explode at any moment, or “volcanoes” who suddenly could erupt, etc.

Danger is even legally recognized by Regulating Norm 16 and endorsed by publication in May 2010 of annex II (Platforms and support facilities) of Regulating Norm 30 (Safety and Health at work at waterway)⁹. The RN 16 states in its annex 2 payment of an additional payment for health risk¹⁰ (equivalent to 30% of the corresponding base wage) to workers performing “dangerous activities or operations with flammables”; and the annex II of RN 30 “establishes minimum requirements of safety and health on work aboard platforms and support facilities used for exploration and production of oil and gas from marine subsoil”. We emphasize that before these regulations there was not anyone specific regulation for activities performed aboard of platforms. The existing was an adaptation of previous norms for maritime units.

In line with the vision considering the possible harmful effects of this type of productive processes, Sevá Filho (1997a) states in epigraph that “the risk is inherent” to the oil industry due to its complex systems, materializations of high risk technologies: “technical risk is something intrinsic and quite characteristic in oil industry”. Seva also states that these intrinsic and various risks are increasingly more collective. The harmful effects of oil activities tend to expand – the so called larger or extended accident risks (FREITAS; PORTO; MACHADO, 2000; LLORY e MONTMAYEUL, 2010) – sometimes hitting, besides workers most directly involved in the process, administrative employees and even people living in neighboring regions.

In the case of offshore platforms, risk notion is also consensual it is really present, because we must bear very much in mind; and for workers with the additional disadvantage of being confined and isolated.

Regarding offshore work, no doubt we would add to the four character-

⁹ It is worth mentioning that in May 2013, it was made available for public consultation the basic text of a new NR - Regulatory norm on safety and health in oil platforms - specifically oriented for this activity.

¹⁰ Without losing sight that additional payments could be subject to criticism, we consider important underlining the existence of some kind of formal acknowledgement regarding danger involving this activity.

istics above mentioned by Ferreria e Iguti (2003) another quite singular two: confinement and isolation. Confinement because during 14 continuous days (when workers are aboard) at the end of daily 12-hour shift, workers do not go back to their homes; they remain in the platform. The working place becomes the living place. Therefore they are exposed to risk 24 hours per day, along the whole period they are on board. And isolation because platforms are on the high seas; this difficults transporting people when accidents, disorders or abnormalities happen and implies in land services and even abandon of the platform in the remotest chance of expanded accidents, like in Enchova in 1984. This casualty killed 37 workers from that platform (PCE-1) when one of whaler boats used during abandon ship operation plunged into the water. Therefore, factors associated to confinement and isolation work as aggravations of the risk inherent to the activity of oil workers.

The long and detailed list of risk factors mentioned by Rundmo (1992, 1996) that we do not reproduce here for reasons of space, shows that work on platforms – and in a larger sense in oil industry – combines very high hazard and unhealthiness, because besides risks of fire, explosions and spills, with higher projection in this type of productive processes, there is an extensive and diverse range of other agents mentioned by the author, potentially prejudicial to human health.

In the same sense the ILO – after global offshore disasters in decade of 1980 that ended with Piper Alpha disaster¹¹ (worst accident in number of fatal victims) – alerted us that seen all these factors, oil platforms have a peculiar condition since they gather in a unique way, many different risks, including activities not performed in the interior of the unit (except support tasks) such as shallow diving and particularly deep diving, or transport of people in helicopters, among others (ILO, 1993).

That is why offshore oil exploration is considered one of most risky global activities, where potential of being exposed to certain risks for workers health, safety at facilities and the environment is significantly increased. The Worldwide Offshore Accident Databank (WOAD) Statistical Report of 2007, elaborated by Norwegian company DNV (Det Norske Veritas) – compiling global offshore industry information on accidents for the period 1970 to 2007 –, presents indicators ratifying high level of risk involved in this activity.¹² They have recorded 553 accidents with deaths, totaling 2.171 fatalities, being 646 of them in events with helicopters. There was a total loss of 171 different units operating in the seas and 145 helicopters.

Based in this record, we are worried because of interdiction of Petrobras platforms, decided by ANP (National Oil Agency)¹³ in last year's, due to safety

11 In 1988, in the British sector of the North sea, some flaws in the gas treatment system, followed by explosions, fire and total loss of the unit, caused death of 167 of total of 226 workers of the platform, besides countless wounded people. To block the spill, 36 wells were sealed, along 22 days.

12 WOAD data bank information for mentioned period (1970-2007) is recorded at Risk Assessment Data Directory (OGP, 2010). See also report: Accident Statistics for Offshore Units on the United Kingdom Continental Shelf (UKCS), de 2009 (<http://www.oilandgasuk.co.uk/cmsfiles/modules/publications/pdfs/EHS30.pdf>).

13 National agency of oil, natural gas and biofuels.

reasons¹⁴, especially considering already accumulated knowledge in SMS management (Safety, environment and health) by a huge organization like Petrobras. Or even, see the company unfulfilling a court settlement with Petrobras engaged to improve platform conditions, where risk situations persisted and also improper maintenance, according to Labor Federal Public Ministry¹⁵. It also worries us to see analysis of accident causation including most direct and immediate factors and not ensuring appropriate visibility to the multiplicity and cross-cutting between different factors allowing these events to occur (PATÉ-CORNELL, 1993; WISNER, 1994; FREITAS *et al.*, 2001; PAVARD *et al.*, 2009). In particular, aspects of work organization and managerial practices, since there is fear of enlightening real role of medium and high management in the origin of accidents due to possible sanctions that may come (LLORY, 1999). By adopting this attitude, the company seems to distance from shortcuts allowing faster drop of what we call substantial and dangerous discrepancy between technology management (admittedly in the vanguard) and risk management (mismatching with previous condition of leader). Regarding the analysis of some disasters, Wisner (1994) suggests going even further. He proposes as a tool what is named anthropo-technological approach:

So, we move from register of functional responsibilities of operators and its managers, to people conceiving and installing technical devices, and later to the register of responsibilities of those deciding economic and social – or even political – conditions in which dangerous device was conceived, installed and used. (WISNER, 1994, p. 54).

It is also worth stressing than we must pay attention to avoid all these more visible factors, to modify subjective dimension of offshore activity, and its consequent mobilization in different ways. By its nature, the work onboard requires permanent strategies to face risk agents already known, such as explosions, fires, spills or leaks, but also other countless adversities: lack of social and family life when being onboard, extensive and daily workdays for 14 consecutive days; good knowledge of most complex tasks; being confined; troubled relations with bosses etc. These are aspects mostly associated to psycho-social risks.

To follow, we will see how people deal with confinement and other questions within the scope of work subjective dimension.

The confinement and time in hourglass, at Campos Basin

At Campos basin units, most of people onboard are outsourced. The

¹⁴ ANP's unprecedented decision of banning platforms due to safety reasons occurred for the first time with P-33. Later the unit stopped for a maintenance period during 80 days.

¹⁵ Available at <<http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2015/03/1596428-petrobras-nao-cumpre-acordo-para-melhorar-condicoes-de-plataformas.shtml>>. Accessed in March 1, 2015.

offshore work is done in two rotating shifts of 12 hours, where daily shift – for example from 12.00 to 24.00, of from 07.00 to 19.00 hours, is substituted by another crew at night, from 00.00 to 12.00 or from 19.00 to 07.00 hours, and so forth 14 during days. Usually, this period is covered working first seven days in the morning shift, and other seven at night. Then workers go back to dry land, remaining there for 14 days, and being substituted in high seas by his back, the partner with whom he changes positions. For Petrobras workers, day off period (landed) is 21 days.

Vicissitudes of confinement, even for most skilled workers, getting a better salary, represent a potentially harmful element for mental health:

When being on board you stay in touch with company problems [...] during 24 hours a day and without any contact with your family, no social contacts as well. This is very stressing. I usually say, that if confinement would be good, prisons would not be punishment for criminals.

The end of above reporting brings us back to a desperate letter denouncing facts – “offshore man and upper level prison” –, from one of interviewees by Leite (2009). She disclosed it to illustrate sensation of being in jail when a man is on the offshore work and, would attack indiscriminately everybody. Nevertheless we understand that malaise produced by confinement affects everyone in a greater or lesser extent, we consider important emphasizing that suffering by it caused is differently experienced, with greater or lesser intensity, depending how was psychologically lived, and what strategies were mobilized to mitigate its effects. Certainly to be “*off* from social life” is a dramatic experience for men who from the tenth day cannot stay on board without making use of tranquilizers, as mentioned by Leite (2009, p. 123-127). It cannot be inferred from this fact however this is a rule. In any case, this letter brings us once again the striking quote of a deep diving professional, a so unheard involving a sort of confinement in the offshore confinement: if platform can be considered a “jail”, then a hyperbaric chamber would be a “jail solitary confinement” (BARRETO, 1998).

But if metaphor of the prison seems exacerbated to report offshore reality of dimension, there is no way to circumvent the sensation de imprisonment that this space brings when you cannot leave it. And if so, the question is how to elaborate psychically this sensation. Perhaps due to this, it is vital trying to invest in providing strategies to cope better with differences regarding the other, as mentioned by the oil worker when asked about what is valued in a platform - speaking about social relations: a certain degree of “solidarity”. This goes in the same direction than what Schwartz (2010) calls “good things about living together”, because when one recognizes itself in another’s suffering, the offshore worker opens space for – in some level, supporting the other, contributing to mitigate the suffering he seizes, and prevent developing beyond

“pre-depression” stage, remaining in a “latent” stage (see down here reproduction of the statement). This is not an easy task, since in certain contexts relations are crossed by discrepancies and conflicts not always overcome, linked to countless reasons generated by daily offshore situations. And when mentioning debate of values, and speaking about the importance of such identification, jail space is again recalled:

Worker #1: I think that word solidarity is being well used. In its deepest sense, I mean: I personally identify myself with you regarding your pre-depression, this latent depression due to being here, and this modifies our relationship, you know A situation such as this one must also exist in prison, and it should be very interesting, in a more decent prison than ours, where a life condition can be possible, with a solidarity relationship in this sense. And also of the own social control, because everything is known, isn't it?

This oil workers' personal feelings of being “*off* from social life”, creates a certain “social shift” impacting in the relationship with friends, neighbors, relatives. This affects social interaction and affective life of people on board, as we can see in these statements of workers with a great deal of experience:

Another thing which really affected us is ... about the time we spend in dry land, you know. This was complicated, you are in your time off, and you have a relationship with people, with the society. I live in Campos, but people are very well related with people from Rio de Janeiro. So you see then how different is the relationship of persons with... We are far more widely known, so what bothered me were people seeing us disembarking, and saying: “but already in your time off? Oh... good to see you having a time off. ” And they did not know that we work 14 days without any interruption. Sometimes we even do not know it is Sunday...

We are in some sense part of the society, and we saw everybody working, isn't it? At the time I had no children and my wife worked, so I remained completely alone, therefore with whom could I relate? With people also having their time off. Then I only met these fellows, I lived with them... We went out together and only spoke about our job. Having a beer, and saying: oh that dive, the “shit” it happened, that thing that could improve and the platform guy talking stupid nonsense.’

A basic issue related to confinement is the fact that oil workers stay at least 14 days without interruption in contact with problems and matters related to work. In other jobs, workers go back at home and therefore they live together with other questions, other problems, other realities. This daily commuting puts some tensions into perspective, allowing workers to reflect, to take some distance. But in the case of people on board, the resting time may not be

enough for it, insofar physical and social environment remains the same, since oil workers work and rest in the same place.

[...] because working in dry land is quite different. You don't have ... this must be between quotes, ok? Because many people feel they are under pressure. But I think that in dry land you only have to work eight hours, and here they are twelve, there in dry land people go out for lunch and take one hour and a half, and at the end of the day you know that you will leave the job or will meet somebody you like, there you will have some support. Or, if this person does not exist, you will be in your favorite corner, you know what I mean? There is that possibility of you leaving to a completely different place and be resting much longer than here.

In the occupational doctor's view, it is as if on board people would live a reversal situation, because when discussing the relation they establish between the working space and the domestic space, he verifies that the place of residence is often confused with the working place during the 14 days they comply. Same doctor says: "this is what they could not notice yet, that they are reversing positions, becoming a tourist at home". It is worth stressing that depending on the type of contract to what are submitted, some oil workers may have to stay longer than current 14 days. Shift may extend to 21 days (it happens to some outsourced workers, covering shifts of 21 days and then 21 rest), or even 28 days (more common in the case of foreigners). If we consider that some of these outsourced workers sometimes extend on board time or go back to the platform soon after going to dry land, they can stay up to 30 or 40 days away from family life. Then we could affirm that there is a sort of double inversion: on board, residence of these workers is confused with the working place, and in dry land, leisure time is lived with colleague workers, as verified in some statements. Or in other words, private life *locus* is contaminated by work, as already mentioned by Dejours (1993) and Wisner (1994). Wisner reminds that "polluting effects" in certain areas of life are so more considerable when higher is pressure in some work situations. Over the years, this can appear under the form of a "stress conditioning", as stated by an oil worker with many years of experience in the offshore activity:

Worker 1 (T1):[...] You get stressed. It is not considered stress, but it is stress, right? It is a sort of stress conditioning.

Question 2: And what is this?

T1: I went to TeleRio, and I bought an alarm clock. There were many models, alarm clocks and clock radios. I found a nice one, and I said to myself: "I will put it to wake me up at 6 in the morning, to catch a wave..." I put the alarm clock at 06.00 AM and when the alarm tone sounded, it was exactly alike as fire alarm in the platform. I jumped out from the bed to get my lifejacket, ok? That was at

home, and it happened other times as well. You jump off the bed to get your lifejacket, this is conditioning...

The confinement issue has been explored by Losicer (2004) from a clinical-institutional perspective, as already mentioned. He states that, even for those considered as “functionally adapted”, the subjective experience of living in an imaginary “no man’s land” borderline, would produce in these workers an unquestionable feeling of existing in “another world” and being in possession of “other self”.

In our research we have verified that in some extreme cases, workers - after landing, go directly to drink at a bar, and only the next day they go home. Or, on the contrary, before boarding, at the end of pre-shipment tension (PST), they go to some bar and then to the airport still with signs of intoxication, as we verified in one shipment. Or these pre-loading tensions end in a sort of emotional imbalance, due to rigorous work (long shifts, successive on boards, insufficient and interrupted rest times). Some even ask for help, but not always adapt to prescribed treatments, and can reach a state of exhaustion, as seen in down here statement:

[...] It was tranquilizer. They were very strong and depressed me. Then I stopped, abandoned the treatment because I was not solving my problem, I felt depressed, so I quit. And then, it happened. I went back to the doctor to talk about my condition... and told him I needed a document. He replied that he could not issue a certificate stating I was not in condition of going on board because I was not in treatment, and besides he did not have my medical record. Maybe he thought oil workers go on board and need a record [he begins to get upset and raises his voice]. The story of an oil worker is one of lack of emotional control, oil workers do not need, oil workers on board do not need a record issued by a psychiatrist to... if you ask him and if he says... when he says he is not in condition, you must trust he is not in condition. He (the oil worker) really, he really is about to have an outbreak. Because he only does this when being about to have an outbreak. This is so true that everybody there is going on board. Now, tell me, do you believe that these four thousand oil workers are in their normal psychological and health conditions, as they should have to be? Of course they are not! You don’t need to be a doctor; you don’t need to be a psychologist to say this. The more you talk... Me myself, when I talk about this, it is because I am really...

However, even without reaching the point of decompensation, and even knowing that the acute pre-boarding experience may arise in many different ways, the psychical cost associated to this period is high, as can be seen in our talk with an experienced operator, when he discusses over psychic dynamics in his domestic space during his three weeks off. It is interesting to emphasize

that in a certain moment he goes back in its own way to the concern stated by the oil worker in previous tale about mental health mental in platforms. He highlights certain stereotype of offshore workers – “some people are a little bit crazy, you know what I mean” –, they enjoy developing some attitudes suggesting need of therapeutic monitoring, more frequent and incisive in divers’ speech. (FIGUEIREDO, 2001):

Question (P) 2: And when you are at home, is it like in the platform or like in dry land?¹⁶

Worker (T): Oh, the first week is like in the platform. It is only stress [everybody laughs]. The second week is ok; it seems that nobody is at home. And then, in the third week, oh my God! .., God please help me! It is so stressing...

P2: Pre-shipment?

T: It is PST [everybody laughs again].

P2: Why?

T: Look, because you know that you are going to a unit where, when arriving, nobody knows what will find there. As I already said, there are a lot of things to do; you don’t know where to start. Sometimes, it is a fortnight where everything runs smoothly, without any problems. But some other fortnights it is a matter of saying: God please help me; we only go to sleep at two or three in the morning; and sometimes you don’t even sleep, you go without sleeping, understand? And why? Because we need to compress some gas, we must do this: compressing some gas. It doesn’t matter how. “You cannot burn, it is burning too much. The well is closed, it has self-sufficiency to hit. Pressure cannot drop” [when finishing his talk he simulates daily management requirements].

P2: So, when being in the platform you work without any interruption because of these situations, and when arriving at home, how are your first two days there, for example?

T: The first two days, I only want to sleep.

P2: And do you feel like being out of the world?

T: No, I remain “connected”, very much “connected” with the platform... I mean it, I have to begin to relax already, because in the short time I will be retiring and this stress will cause a problem in old age, with effects that could seriously affect me. So, it would be interesting for all of us the offshore workers, to go to a psychologist.

P2: Do you think so?

T: Yes, I do. Some people from there are a little bit crazy (laughs).

P2: What do you mean?

T: Oh... the attitudes... Sometimes, they explode...

Another important point to be mentioned is that confinement helps to underline the marital unfaithfulness “phantom”, symbolically expressed

¹⁶ He was reflecting about his difficulties in coping with dry land work.

through permanent jokes on the issue in untranslatable idioms mentioning cuckhold punishment, and also lyrics of a pagode (a type of Brazilian music) written by the own oil workers, sent to us by a Petrobras technical inspector. This is something which can be seen as creating defensive systems through dissimulation, to fight this source of suffering that this “phantom” seems to constitute (RODRIGUES, 2001, p. 129).

This discussion highlights questions related to work and gender (HIRATA, 2002; NEVES; BRITO; ARAÚJO *et al*, 2011), because in platforms ratio between men and women workers has always been quite unequal: for example, of 200 people on board, women are maximum ten, or maybe less. There are cases like a nurse which boarded with another two women in a platform named Safe Jasmínia, where crew included around 300 men. She told about some constraints faced in some units, particularly in the past, when there was a lack of stricter norms regarding some situations such as going into the auditorium in the morning, around 10.00 hours and encounter the crew watching a porn movie, or erotic images in computer screens, or in cabin walls, and other more complicated situations like explicit harassing.

Some of the workers with whom we talked about this subject declared that women on board, even in a reduced number, was seen as something positive: “men don’t do this in an environment where there are no women, but when they are on board men take more showers, wash more frequently their overalls, speak lower in public spaces shared with women...”

It is worth mentioning that when this worker talks about “public places” he refers to canteens and leisure areas, such as TV and game’s rooms, besides other spaces varying from one to another platform, such as gym, sports courts and swimming pools. It also became more frequent having areas to carry religious services, fact that some workers see as stimulated by the arrival of women to units. This was an aspect that called our attention in one of the three platforms we visited in September 2007, since we did not know it had been instituted.

And going back to previous subject, when mentioning what is usually done during “leisure time”, our counterpart said something that other colleague workers also mentioned: that most of the crew watch the news and also Globo network soap operas every night, obviously these working during day shift. And he also mentioned that a good part of the crew frequently gives priority to watching erotic movies.

At the beginning of the 1990s a noteworthy change was introduced: TV sets in the cabins. A theoretically collective leisure habit became private, within each cabin. For an operator with almost 30 years of activity in platforms, meeting people at the collective space was good for strengthening companionship, since “jokes that arose”, and affective exchange worked as a good antidote against stress. A technical inspector, also with many years of work, said that having TV sets in cabins could affect sleeping, since it is there where workers sleep. Even if most of cabins are occupied by two people that rotate in

using them, due to shift working of 12 x 12 hours – when one rests, the other is at work –, there is as risk of the TV set being a stimulating activity that could threaten quality of sleep.

Before ending this item, we consider timely go back to discussion regarding “jokes”, because some of them applied by most experienced to the newcomers (*os borrachos* in the original, meaning the drunks) are hazing. They work as a rite of passage. When freshmen get on board, without any previous experience in offshore activities, older workers use to require from freshmen performing tasks that, due to his lack of experience, will bring later muscle pain or other constraint. It is common for example, asking the “borrachos” to transport an extremely heavy wrench to a long distance, “in order to make him learn that there work is really heavy”. Dejours (1993) sees in this kind of initiation one of the stages that are part of freshmen acceptance requirements by the group.

And, when considering different characteristics until here listed, it is important knowing in what measure nature of work and type of predominant organization, where confinement is a structural characteristic, could breed a “threat avoidance” situation, as identified by Losicer (2004, p. 107), that probably motivated already mentioned clinical-institutional intervention, conducted by this author in the first middle of decade of 1990s. According to Losicer, metaphor used to formulate the demand was a “time bomb” activated in the system, needing to be disabled. He underlines that according to people on board, it was a “saturation” of the ability of the system to tolerate an “end of line” for less skilled, seen by the management as the referred threat”, jeopardizing the own platform operation. In the course of our research, we had never seen a situation like that one. Nevertheless reports show worrying levels of dissatisfaction they do not show any “threat avoidance” signal. There is an emblematic statement from an oil worker who saw the first accident at Enchova in 1984 and in a later shipment could not stand the situation. However, this case of which we reproduce now part of his statement, does not allow larger generalization, so we put the question as was sent by Losicer. The worker says: “then I went to a psychiatrist... after the accident at Enchova in 1984, I had a psychological problem in the platform, I went on board and had to come back to dry land in a ... There in the middle of my boarding, I had a lack of emotional control [...]”

Though in other context, a research (RODRIGUES, 2001, p. 3) points even the contrary. They state that in spite of all adverse factors, considering labor market insecurity and balance between advantages and disadvantages, there would be more people trying to get jobs on board that the opposite. Perhaps because of working in a context where productive restructuration advanced more intensely, making worse a potentially adverse situation, including psychological dimension, Losicer faced the imminence of what he identified as “threat avoidance”.

We cannot forget that confinement also implies coping with difficulties related to pre-disembarking tension (PDT), which like pre-shipment tension

deserved more attention by Leite (2009). This expression is used by workers to enhance last days greater “weight” prior to going on board, usually lived with increasing anxiety, which tends to grow as end of cycle approaches. In following statement, our interlocutor widely tells about his difficulties associated to offshore confinement. He relates different content questions, going from everybody’s daily ones living the offshore activity, to other extremely complex and sensitive, such as compulsive consumption of alcohol, cannabis smoking or snorting cocaine. He resumes discussion on mental health heavier cost of misery trend, from the tenth day of confinement on, and he finishes underlining how, since then, “this becomes heavy”, which we could apprehend as a progressive increase not only of physical strain, but also psychical, there including the PDT:

Worker (T): For a while I lived as a **trecheiro** – a stretcher – a worker travelling stretches of road following the work where it exists. And I suffered quite a lot, I spent those 14 days out of home and when I had to go back it was a pain, do you understand me? The fact is that I don’t like this confined environment. It is not a good one. You don’t see dogs, you don’t see women. On board there are very little women. You don’t see kids, you don’t see old people, and you are living among a lot of iron, in the middle of the sea. You see very few stars, because due to that huge amount of bright lights, even if the sky is clean with the new moon, you can’t identify many stars. So this is a really inhospitable environment. I don’t like it and I don’t adapt to it. I suffered a lot when I had to go on board, do you understand me? I can imagine these guys going on board forced to, the stress they must have... What I most felt was the following: after 14 days on board, I usually disembarked very upset, “angry”. Annoyed, speaking too much, a real chatterbox. And my speech was too much poetic, everything was nice to me: “what a beautiful dog! Look what a beautiful old lady” And I got really drunken, yeah... [Emphasizing it with gestures]. Oh my brother, it was about five days to go back to normal. At night, drinking like a fish. And I know a gang like that, they disembark and go drinking, they are binge drinkers. These roustabouts working 14 days shifts and then 14 days off, they disembark already thinking in smoking a “joint” or the cocaine they will snort and so on. And they say: “It’s the following: I separate my money from the one I give to my wife, and then I go to the hill, to drink” and they stay there. This is what happens to me, I come back and I feel upset and with a certain compulsion to use drugs, this happens with many laborers, with many of them [...]. These guys they disembark with a huge compulsion to drink...I saw this when disembarking after nine, seven, even ten days, I was feeling cool... Last days, people talk too much also; last days are the worst, taking longer to come to an end. Seven, eight, nine days go away easily. When I know I will disembark after ten, nine or eight days, I feel great. But in other cases, when it is a matter of ten, eleven, twelve or thirteen days, then it gets heavy, things weigh too much.

Disembarking from the platform is the end of confinement and beginning of recovering social coexistence on dry land, time to turn the hourglass – in reference to report described by R. Pessanha (1994, p. 149) when an oil worker said: “our watch could be an hourglass”. From previously mentioned report, we partially pictured some of the dynamics ruling stay of these professionals on dry land, without trying to establish broader generalizations, since many variables influence this process. Nevertheless, it is worth dealing with other aspect enhanced by Losicer (2003) regarding frequent difficulties these workers face to being listened when coming back from the seas. Perhaps this is one of most recurrent mentioned facts regarding coexistence during off period, with friends also working in the offshore. Losicer (2003) stresses the statement of an oil worker, which in the middle of a growing listening difficulty shown by her mate gave up telling her what he lived during the two weeks he was on board. He went so far as to say: [...] Today [two years after going on board] I know you people from dry land will really never know us... I can't talk about it. For some of these workers, it is like if facing the indescribable of work would only remain resignation, on the face of incomprehension of their activities by those not being part of the offshore universe, or in other words staying on board and coping a series of other peculiarities and vicissitudes, as we have seen up to here.

Final considerations: health, work and trade union action in oil offshore activity

In spite of Petrobras boast that its SEH (Safety, Environment and Health) program was the most expensive in the world in last decade, with a year cost of R\$ 10 billion from 2000 to 2009,¹⁷ indicators of serious accidents - some with deaths, are still really worrying, particularly regarding outsourced workers. If we look to the whole Petrobras system, balance is not at all satisfying: 344 deaths between 1995 and 2014, being 280 outsourced workers, as per data released by Single Oil Federation at the beginning of 2015.¹⁸ This situation is aggravated if we add to these figures accidents with serious and irreversible consequences. The case involving the accident with platform ship Cidade de São Mateus is emblematic to this respect.

We think that higher exposition of outsourced workers to accident risks, work organization inadequacies etc., deserves careful attention of oil workers' trade union, because we cannot forget that at the end of the 1980s, the logic of outsourcing began to grow, and not only in intermediate activities, but also in some final process activities, dramatically changing in the 1990s ratio between permanent and outsourced workers. In such a degree that in platform P-36, when the accident occurred in March 2001, only 25% of its crew was composed by permanent workers. This is almost unchanged, since significant increase of

17 TN PETRÓLEO, v. 12 n. 70, Jan./Feb. 2010, p. 46-51.

18 In a document named “Deaths due to typical work accidents at Petrobras operational bodies” – FUP's Press advisory – updated in February 2015.

permanent workers during last decade could not modify ratio between permanent and outsourced workers, due to abrupt expansion of offshore operation and production investment since then to this day. In the meantime, vessel chartering policy was modified; now Petrobras charters a ship and its full crew to operate for them in a final activity - for example, oil and gas production, and has only one own employee monitoring the operation. It now remains to see what other agreements could be done in case draft Bill 4330 is approved, allowing even deeper outsourcing rules flexibilization.

Regarding confinement, we consider that each oil worker could develop own alternatives of coexistence for offshore work, and that set of mentioned factors will not inexorably end in illnesses or pathogenic suffering. Meanwhile, some of these factors besides other mentioned during our research related to organization of the work allow increasing risks in an environment where they already exist in a high level. We insist in what appears as most objective and explicit dimension of an activity with entire harmfulness potential, it cannot fully overcome subjective dimension, at the risk of missing the possibility of creating an effective intervention in mental health care.

In short, a substantive alteration of current context – allowing “workers’ health” to leave behind its “less evident side”, as stated in this dossier – calls for a broad debate among representatives of big companies acting in the sector (where Petrobras clearly stands out), trade unions and the public power. It is an enormous challenge, particularly if we consider that beginning of operations of several units on “pre-salt” areas, when Petrobras expects to double its daily production volume in next few years, will generate an increase of crews embarked in hostile and adverse offshore activities conditions. And all this in a conjuncture where the company is under real “cross fire”, in the midst of a serious crisis caused by corruption scandals, involving members of the executive board, senior directors of contractors, besides representatives and senators.

In view of unfavorable juncture currently occurring in the company, together with an international trade union style crisis (MUNIZ, *et al.*, 2013) some people may say that “current context substantive alteration” is a tough issue showing up. Nevertheless, we prefer to bet that facing great tasks may encourage trade unions and other progressive movements in the fight for health and safety at workplaces, to rethink and reinvent some of the practices of this field, with the boldness of those aiming to ensure intransigent defense of life.

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