

## “The revolt” in Colombia: critical approaches from social work

By Carolina González<sup>1</sup> and María Soledad García<sup>2</sup>

*“What we want is to weave together, among all colleagues, from all over the country and internationally, to make visible the violation of the rights of people who are demonstrating and resisting in the streets, and that we reflect on our role, on how we participate and how we social workers contribute in this socio-political crisis.”*

In this issue dedicated to the analysis of these times of crisis in the world and particularly in Latin America, we would like to share this interview conducted by María Soledad García, President of the Association of Social Work Professionals of Mendoza, Argentina, with Colombian social worker Carolina González, who has been through a powerful experience in the front line of professional intervention in the context of the social outburst occurring in that country. For her part, Soledad, through the work of the Professional Association, has participated in the organization of various activities aimed at critical reflection on neoliberalism, revolts in Latin America and the role of social work in these contexts of socio-political crisis. We hope you enjoy this conversation, which remains open to the discussion of the various forms that professional intervention can take in the current context, in the face of the “critical times” we are living in. We thank Carolina and Soledad for sharing their conversation with us.

**Soledad:** Hello Carolina, thank you very much for talking with us this afternoon. I am part of the College of Social Workers of the province of Mendoza, Argentina, with whom we have been working in a series of meetings on Latin American Social Work. That is why it is so interesting for us to be able to interview you, because we know that there are instances of struggle and resistance that are common to Social Work throughout the region, throughout our America. We believe that it is necessary to be able to identify them and also to be able to position ourselves as social workers in these

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times and in these challenges that neoliberalism imposes on all the democracies of the region. In the name of these democracies it is necessary to speak of human rights, and to put in tension how we understand our own democratic systems.

We think that we have to vindicate and sustain a feminist Social Work, linked to popular feminisms, decolonial, that embodies these disputes of meaning against neoliberalism, and that these are collective struggles. And it is from these keys that we have been working during this year, through discussions we have held with colleagues from both Chile and Colombia, who have been able to tell us about the experiences of the revolt and the social outbreak in their countries. Thinking of ourselves as traversed by the same struggles, it is a pleasure for me to be able to have this interview with you.

To begin with and to contextualize, I would like to ask you, first of all, about your professional career in Cali, Colombia.

**Carolina:** Thank you very much for this space. I graduated from Social Work in Cali more than 10 years ago. It has been a very nice opportunity to find myself in this profession since I was a teenager, because since that time I started to get involved in social projects, first in the school where I studied, then I worked as a promoter in a program for adolescent peers. That helped me to visualize myself as a social worker.

After graduating, I have worked in different sectors, such as health and education. Now I am dedicated to community work.

**Soledad:** From that experience, how have you lived the social outbreak in Cali, ‘the capital of resistance’?

**Carolina:** With many emotions and mixed feelings, with nights and days of anguish, of crying, of admiration for the people who resist, but above all with a lot of anguish because I have had people very close to me affected by the violence with which what we call the “social outbreak” has been repressed.

The current social outburst began in November 2019 when some social leaders were assassinated. Among them, the murder of a social worker, Cristina Bautista, from the Nasa community, in Toribio Cauca. One begins to think from the profession, how this affects us, how our profession is also affected by the internal armed conflict that has been going on for many decades here in our country.

The social explosion in our country has not occurred since April 28, 2021. The key point or explosion point is April 28, but the unrest had been growing from 2019, when Cristina Bautista was assassinated. That generated huge indignation, and to that is added the economic situation of our country and corruption. That begins to generate in people all that collective nonconformity that makes November 21, 2019 one of the most massive mobilizations that there has been in the history of our country. As a result of that mobilization on November 22, there were also some blockades, some smaller mobilizations, and, from that moment on, fear began to spread as a way to stop those mobilizations.

Then threats began to spread in the neighbourhoods, saying, for example, that as a result of the mobilization, the protesters were going to enter buildings, apartments, attack and rob people. All this in order to give the government a tool to decree a curfew, to take groups of police and the army to the streets. At that time one of the cities most affected by this situation was Bogota, the capital, and there are lags in other cities. This situation continued to present isolated events more or less until December. In February 2020 a new mobilization was called and all the unions got ready for a great mobilization on March 25, which did not materialize due to the arrival of the pandemic. On April 28th of this year, another great national mobilization took place as a reaction to the tax reform proposal presented by the national government.

Everything stops because of the arrival of the pandemic in our country. However, cases of corruption and assassinations of social leaders continue. The pandemic does not stop that.

**Soledad:** Different actors are joining this mobilization that becomes massive. Who are those actors who emerge, who appear on the scene, who were more invisible in their struggles and their demands?

**Carolina:** Young people were extremely invisible. Their opinion was not taken into account. But they appear on the scene mobilizing all the cities, using the mechanisms we have today: social networks. That is the icon of this social outburst, which differentiates it from other mobilizations of years ago. Indigenous movements from different areas of the country, which have also been marginalized and affected by the armed conflict, are also joining in. Groups of peasant representatives began to appear in a stronger way.

The LGBTQ+ community begins to appear in this social outburst. In other words, the mobilization is no longer only of unions or workers. It is no longer only for teachers. It

is of the whole civil society from different sectors: mothers with their children, children demonstrating for a better world. I live near an upper class sector and to see how the traffic stopped on that road and how there were children, young people, adults, seniors and people of all ethnicities mobilizing was very encouraging.

Here in Cali, called the capital of resistance, there were several blockade points. Educational activities were developed to inform people, cultural activities and community kitchens for the demonstrators or people who remained at these points of resistance. Movements such as the 'Universidad Pal Barrio' began to emerge, which proposes to open opportunities for young people or adults who want to take a state test or who want to strengthen their knowledge, because this social outburst also reveals the situation of poverty, not only in terms of food but also in terms of access to opportunities. Collectives, cultural or even manual workshops are beginning to appear. There is a sector, for example, in which they are doing dance, weaving, handicrafts around the theme of the social outburst. There are also beginning to appear calls for feminist reflection on the violence that women have suffered or have suffered in the context of the social explosion.

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**Soledad:** What is the current situation of the social outburst? At what stage do you identify this struggle and these mobilizations in Colombia?

**Carolina:** We feel that the outburst continues, the nonconformity continues. Yesterday (date) we commemorated 6 months of the social outburst, there were new mobilizations, a little less massive than before, but there were some. Once again there were confrontations, unfortunately, because it is thought that the agents of the state do not allow people to express themselves freely. The murders continue, the conflict continues. In other words, the social unrest in Colombia does not stop. Nothing has been fixed here. The breaking point was the tax reform, and what they did was to lower it and make some modifications that for the most part still do not benefit the Colombian people. They have just overturned a law of guarantees that says that the State can do whatever it wants with the money during this upcoming electoral campaign for different positions, but especially for the presidential election campaign. The government does not answer for the lost money of the Ministry of Technology -Mintic- and Communications.

This explosion is still latent, it is still like the heart, beating, beating, beating. And possibly it will reach a point where people will have to go back to the streets again, they will have to support those who resist. We continue without clarity regarding the processes that have been carried out by members of the state against the Colombian



people, such as what happened in Bogota with one of the demonstrators in 2019, Dylan Cruz, a young man who was demonstrating and who was attacked by a projectile from the anti-riot squad - Esmad-. But one of the statements they give is that he went through the projectile shot. In other words, the disagreements are still there and everything is still very latent.

**Soledad:** And in this scenario of socio-political crisis, how has Social Work positioned itself? How has it organized itself?

**Carolina:** First, there is the individual dimension, where as social workers we joined the points of resistance, to support by delivering food, clothes, let's say, actions of an assistance type, the immediate thing to continue resisting, to continue telling the state the nonconformities we had. Second, there are the actions to disseminate what is happening at a national and international level. Third, there is also the creation of lines of attention in psychology, legal attention, and support in communications. In this framework, for example, a colleague came up with a form to create the 'first line of Social Work'. It is disseminated by WhatsApp, Facebook, and approximately 270 colleagues at national and international level adhere and this 'first line of Social Work' is formed.

However, when we make a first call to see how we can support what we can do as the 'first line of Social Work', we realize that to contribute within the framework of the social outburst, we also have to review our situation as social workers, and review ourselves inwardly. Then we realize that there are some situations that are very strong within our profession, such as, for example, that the code of ethics is not in force, that there is no ethics committee functioning, that the union organizations, even starting from the council itself, do not have updated information in social networks or other pages, they do not manifest themselves in front of what is happening in the social outburst.

We proposed that in order to be able to contribute to this outburst, in an organized way, we had to start reviewing and we changed the name from 'first line of Social Work' to 'Social Work Weave' (Corporación Tejido de Trabajo Social), because precisely what we want is to weave together, among all colleagues, from all over the country and internationally, to make visible at an international level the violation of the rights of people who are demonstrating and resisting in the streets, and to reflect on our role, on how we participate and how we social workers contribute to this crisis. We could say

that the formation of this initiative, the Corporación Tejido de Trabajo Social, is a direct consequence of the social outburst and our intention to contribute in this moment of socio-political crisis in our country.

Our organization is made up of colleagues from various cities in the country: Cali, Bogotá, Medellín, Puerto Asís, Calarcá, well, in different areas, including abroad. We began to create strategies to sensitize students and professionals of Social Work. One of our coordinators is a professor at a university and we began to have conversations with students in one of our classes about how we can see our actions in the reality and context of our country. We started to have meetings with professionals in each zone of the country. We made a call for those who wanted to join the board or spokespersons. And we began to review our objectives as Corporación Tejido de Trabajo Social.

In parallel, several discussions are taking place based on what different colleagues are contributing and building in different parts. So, for example, some universities are calling us to participate in conversations to analyse what is happening, what is being experienced, what we are perceiving in the streets, what we are perceiving in the territories. This generates these opportunities for dialogue that had been somewhat lost due to the pandemic, but which are being taken up again from the virtual world and this is happening not only here in Cali but in different parts of the country as well.

**Soledad:** In other words, there is a whole new organization emerging from the profession, which has a critical position towards the federations or the more traditional spaces of the profession, let us say. There is a new discussion opening up. Where do these axes of discussion lie, and what are these turning points in relation to the participation of the profession in the mobilizations?

**Carolina:** After April 28, I was still working in the organization of which I am a member. We were working with groups virtually because of the pandemic. But we began to feel that there was a lot of emotional charge because of what was happening, a lot of uncertainty. So we created a strategy to be able to talk to people and communities about what was happening, to generate reflections. We used images and guidelines to work on mental health issues, for example. Some groups said ‘we hadn’t thought about this, not even our managers had told us how we felt about the social outburst and you are doing it, you are thinking about it’. So it was an exercise of reflection through photos of the mobilizations of the social outburst. This was very significant, and allowed us to talk about the emotions involved. In the photographs there were cultural expressions, of union between generations, of protest against the agents of the state. This allowed us to reflect on what we can do to not lose hope, to resist, to continue contributing to society.

A criticism was also raised regarding social workers who do not say ‘I support the social outburst or I agree with what they are demonstrating’, because somehow they are part of the system and that can limit them in terms of speaking out or participating. One tries to understand that, however, at a collective level one hopes that as social workers we are more united to accompany the whole society at this moment, even from the micro-spaces.

**Soledad:** It is interesting to think about these critical times, crossed by the political crisis and the health crisis due to the pandemic, because it is also a critical time for the profession, as we can rethink ourselves in the face of these challenges. Have you been able to generate different forms of organization in this scenario?

**Carolina:** Between April 28 and May 31, they were days of resistance, also of mourning for the loss of lives. From that moment on, the proposal of the Social Work collective was gestated. And since then we have been working collectively. We have already held three meetings at national level, where we discuss the implications of the social outbreak and the pandemic, and also the disagreements with our profession. For 5 years we have been asking the Ministry of Education to revise the proposal that incorporated Social Work in the area of health and welfare, taking it out of the social sciences. These are nonconformities that come from before the outbreak, but now we have been able to make them much more visible. The outbreak has generated that we communicate not with 10 or 20 people but with 300 people at national and international level. The associations begin to turn their heads here and say ‘ah... well we are not mobilizing networks, we are not providing information, we are not meeting people, we are not doing much, we have stopped a lot... and here there is a group of professionals that is moving, that is attracting people and then we have to reach them or we have to look at them to see what they are doing and be able to call them to articulate some actions’. We have held meetings with representatives of national associations, where we have discussed the crisis that Social Work is going through, which has been evident for more than 5 years.

**Soledad:** And, in this antinomy that you just mentioned, generated by belonging to the field of health or social sciences, where do you position yourselves and how do you understand this position?

**Carolina:** Definitely in the social sciences. We were born in the social sciences and that





does not mean that we do not agree with our intervention in health, which is extremely necessary. However, we must also recognize that this limits our action: it makes it technical, deprofessionalizes it, that is, it generates conceptions that do not correspond to the bases that gave rise to Social Work. We are not saying that the social worker cannot be in the arts, because he/she is also necessary there, or that he/she cannot be in the infrastructure sector, because he/she is necessary there. But that does not mean that we should be pigeonholed or placed in an area or in a room where we were not born, we are children of the social sciences and that is where we want to stay, because that is where we can really make a comprehensive intervention and a broad contribution to society.

**Soledad:** Have you been able to articulate with other social or professional collectives in a collective or common front of struggle?

**Carolina:** Yes, for example, we recently joined the first legal line that was also developed within the framework of the social outburst, where lawyers, professors, etc. participate. Colleagues have been involved in the struggles for the recovery of a wetland, where there were not only social workers, but also different cultural and social collectives of different types. And then we also participated in these activities as a Corporation.

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**Soledad:** Are you visualizing processes of knowledge generation from this powerful initiative you are telling us about?

**Carolina:** We are in this process thanks to the opportunities that other organizations have given us. We have been invited to present papers, to produce a magazine from the Corporación Tejido de Trabajo Social. We have just finished the legal formalization as a corporation, and the idea is to review each of the lines of action to project research, and also from communications, because we need to continue visualizing and generating more impact from what we do as a corporation.

**Soledad:** And from your performance as a social worker, what has your professional intervention consisted of during this social outburst?

**Carolina:** Mainly awareness-raising. That is to say, to promote that people are not indifferent to the reality we are living. From the micro level, from the family, from how an act of corruption begins, for example, from what the rules and limits are that we must have clear at home, to major reflections, such as the difference between politics and



proselytism or politicking, to recognize that we are all political subjects and therefore, we must ensure the permanence and respect for our rights. It implies promoting a reflection on the fact that the social outburst is not a response of the present, but has been brewing for a long time. The most enriching thing that I have been able to contribute at this time is to reflect, to sit down and look at our history and to be able to give the importance it deserves to everything that has happened for decades and what is happening today in our country. In one of the points of resistance I gave workshops on images and photography as a method of reflection on all this.

**Soledad:** Of course, and thinking about it from a critical perspective, from those workshops, and from those spaces of community reflection that you mentioned, knowledge is also being produced. From decolonial thinking and taking up Enrique Dussel, an Argentinean philosopher from Mendoza, the philosophy of liberation helps us to identify the subjectivities generated by neoliberalism and who is the other oppressed at present. It allows us to think about how to identify at each moment the oppressed others from Social Work, that other that the explosion has made more visible, and that one of the tasks of Social Work is to be able to question the devices that have historically denied that other. In this sense, I believe that there is a great challenge for Social Work in terms of research and knowledge production. How do you see these challenges?

**Carolina:** There are many challenges. For example, in health, it means fighting against a system that does not provide timely and comprehensive guarantees. We have many other challenges because we are also permeated by a government that does not allow us to do or speak much. I was talking about it just now, I was saying... Wednesday! When the interview is published, that is to say, it could be revealed that I have supported the demonstration and they could make me a target. Because that is what we have become. Whoever supports a point of resistance is against the State, against order and power.

Challenges are to be able to do things well and without fear, without fear, without having to be thinking 'I have to leave the country because they threatened me'. Many of those who have supported this social outburst from reflection (only from reflection), from a publication even on Twitter or Facebook, begin to be threatened, begin to be singled out, begin to be judged by the forces that are on the other side, because that is how we have been polarized in this country. If I don't think like the government, then I am a leftist, and if I think like the government I am a rightist, then I will be criticized and judged by one side or the other.

I believe that the greatest challenge is this: to be able to do things well, to be able to contribute socially and not to be afraid, not to feel afraid, not to be singled out, not to have to leave, not to be murdered as happened to our colleague two years ago. Because two years ago she said: 'if we keep quiet they will kill us and if we talk too, then let's talk'. And she was murdered. I repeat it and it makes my skin itch. Her memory is here. She had the courage to say that publicly into a microphone, and days later she was murdered. One thinks about it. And there will be social workers who say: 'I do not participate because I have a family, I have my children, I do not want to be part of the list of victims of this social outburst'. But there will be others who talk tough, and we are doing things. And there will also be those of us who are willing to say: I do not agree, and I say it in my social networks, at some time during the social outburst I had to remove my profile picture, restrict several things because, of course, we were being singled out. Then we started to restrict photos and migrate to other networks for security reasons, because the persecution continues.

It is a challenge that as social workers we can exercise our profession as it should be, from the defense of human rights, from the guarantee of dignity, from the respect for the difference of the other, but with the full assurance that we will not be attacked, singled out, persecuted, I think that is the biggest challenge. Cristina left us a very significant contribution, but many still do not listen to it.

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**Soledad:** Fear is a big issue in these times, and hence the importance of collective organization as you are doing, aiming that these struggles and resistances are not individual, that they are of mutual protection. How do the organizations become spaces of care and protection in that sense?

**Carolina:** This is valid in every sense. For example, it is very difficult for a woman who is a victim of violence to speak out individually, due to innumerable barriers. But if we women all unite around the prevention of violence, economic, patrimonial, psychological, physical, we can make the problem more visible. It is a way to protect ourselves and to echo. This is also part of the work I do with women, with young people, to be able to say: the power of our struggle is that it is collective, more than what each one of us will do individually. So people want to organize collectively precisely to be able to say 'no, we must do it together, we cannot continue to do it as islands, separately'. I believe that this has been one of the contributions that I have made in my territorial work.



I have a lot of hope in young people, in the sense that they reflect and organize themselves. It was young people who took the lead in a very significant way in this outburst.

**Soledad:** And the mothers and the women who replaced their sons in the front line... I followed the news in the press, it was very strong...

**Carolina:** Women on the front line, the 'front line mothers' and that started to appear, that was great. Also men. In one of the testimonies we collected, one of them told me 'I arrived home and called my son, I asked him where are you? and he said: Dad, I'm at the point of resistance'. And then the father said 'are you coming to the house' and the son said 'no, I'm staying here'. Then the father answered 'son, I'm coming over there and I'll go with you', and when the father arrived, the son said 'dad, what are you doing here'. And the father said 'I don't have the strength to fight but I want to be your shield and I will be your shield'. He made us all cry when he gave his testimony, because we said 'my God, how, how we began to internalize that this struggle is not for young people, it is not for adults, it is not for associations, but for absolutely everyone'. There is a feeling of the collective that has to prevail above all.

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The problem is that nowadays, in the context of electoral campaigns, all this has been used and the idea has been distorted. This is one of the things we have to review even as a collective within the corporation. How can we generate support with someone without getting involved in specific political campaigns?

On the other hand, to ask ourselves how we can be made visible as social workers in the midst of this crisis of social outburst, how we defend that our profession is within the social sciences and that from there we contribute with reflections and proposals on what is happening in our societies.

**Soledad:** Thank you very much Carolina, it seems to me that it is a good way to close with those challenges of the profession that you mention. This conversation has been very mobilizing and enriching. These strong interpellations, this capacity for criticism and self-criticism are so important in our profession. We have a very rich view in relation to other disciplines, in a transversal way in our Latin American peoples. We can think of the revolt that began in October 2019 in Chile, in the processes that are taking place in Argentina, in issues that are similar - these same interpellations to the profession and to the critical situation of our countries. How do you see Latin American Social Work and its possibilities of facing the socio-political crises that our peoples are experiencing?



**Carolina:** I believe there is a path to be strengthened. There are very powerful spaces that we are developing from Social Work in the territories, but nobody knows about them. The contributions made by the academic world to this territorial work in the midst of the outbreak have been very significant. We have to promote this. We need to show the knowledge that we are producing from Latin America. To be able to generate spaces for conversation on an international scale, to be able to exchange knowledge about what we are doing in times of political, social and health crises, from the different countries of our network. We need to strengthen these meeting spaces. We already know that we have tools that we did not know we had before, for example, virtual tools. This socio-political crisis has helped us to see that we have these tools to strengthen our organization.

**Soledad:** Undoubtedly these are critical times we are going through and the truth is that being able to meet, physically and virtually, I think is the way forward, building bridges between colleagues from different countries is one of the ways to keep you on your toes as a profession.

**Carolina:** Of course, and to be able to make the information visible. There are organizations that report the aftermath of this social outbreak, which continue to be updated every day, and if we are not part of the investigation, at least we should visualize, disseminate and make a public impact with that information.

**Soledad:** Yes, absolutely. It is about recovering those voices and at the same time fighting to be heard, as a way to defend our rights, to bet on social justice in our countries. It has been wonderful to listen to you, thank you very much for this time.

Carolina: Thank you very much.

### Find out more about Carolina's and María Soledad's work:

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Monument to the resistance, Cali, Colombia, made by ordinary citizens, remembering the young people killed during the explosion, the diversity and the resistance of a people.

Source: Carolina González's personal register.