

Contact centre workers: loyalty, exit or... voice!

Collective action in a Portuguese contact centre

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Introduction

In the context of a new stage of capitalism, digital work made its appearance and expanded. It includes the call centre industry, that have assumed in the last decades an increasing importance in the process of capitalist accumulation.

This is an industry very relevant both economically and socially. According to data for 2010, quoted by Fuchs (2014a, 234), excluding finance and insurance, there were 8,240 call centre companies in the EU27, which represented 0.18% of the value added, 0.04% of the operating surplus and 3.2% of the employment (4.3 million people). Thiri3n (2007) estimated that between 2.5 and 6.5 million people work in call centres in the United States in 2005. All these millions of workers form what Huws (2003) called the “cybertariat” and Antunes and Braga (2009), the “infoproletariat”. It is one of the component parts of the new “morphology of work” pointed out by Antunes, characterised by the “heterogeneity, complexity and fragmentation of the workforce” (Antunes 2005:209).

Its expansion has been fuelled by globalisation, the service sector growth, the widespread diffusion of ICT and the productive restructuring that features the new capitalist accumulation regime that Harvey (1989) calls “flexible accumulation”, where the destructive nature of capital (Mészáros 1996) is strongly reinforced.

Call centres are the symbol of the network organisation that characterises the actual stage of capitalism, providing services to other companies. In this logic, capital can lower the cost of labour through the widespread practice of outsourcing and offshoring (Bono 2011, 2016; Hualde and Thiri3n 2018; Taylor and Bain 2004, 2005), involving a

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generalised precariousness and poor working conditions. Thus, we can find a major tendency for a mix between the brave new world of the ICT with relations of production that are typical of the past in a context of a deep “real degradation of the virtual work” (Antunes and Braga 2009), a type of relations of production that according to Huws (2009) expanded across the economy, affecting mainly the young people, process this author calls “callcenterisation”.

The changes under the flexible accumulation also reached the subjectivity of the workers, with the apology of individualism to encourage competition between them. New hegemonic logics of domination (Burawoy 1979) are implemented alongside with the old coercive ones and a newspeak arises to “manufacture consent” of domination by the workers, leading them to cooperate with the reproduction of the capital and trying to inhibit their resistance.

The article intends to analyse the process of collective action in the contact centre of Energy², a company in the utilities sector where there have been several strikes since 2016, despite the Taylorization of work and the strict control, as well as the high levels of feminisation and precariousness. The analysis will be drawn within the labour process theory, which has a high heuristic potential to understand the nature of work and control in these workplaces, and the mobilisation theory, to highlight the key factors that have potentiated the process of collective action. The major theoretical contribution of the research is related to the role of the union leadership in the workplace and to the crucial importance of face-to-face communication between union delegates and workers.

As observation techniques, we used primarily semi-structured interviews and additionally documental analysis of company and union documents. The interviews were conducted with six workers recruited by the snowball method, plus two union delegates and a full-time union official. The six workers were interviewed individually in locations chosen by them. The two union delegates and the full-time union official were interviewed collectively at the union’s headquarters.

2. The name of the company was anonymized.

Work organisation and control in the call centres

In the debate about the nature of call centres, two contrasting positions emerge. On the one hand, we have authors who take an optimistic stance about these workplaces, such as Norling (2001), who considers them a “bio-technological unit”, or Frenkel et al. (1998), for whom they are a “mass customized bureaucracy”, a hybrid model. On the other hand, we have a wide range of authors, who refer to them as “modern-day sweatshops” (Paul and Huws 2002:14) or “electronic communication factories” (Castells 2002).

These contrasting positions are certainly consequence of the fact that call centres are not a homogeneous reality, neither in terms of the operations carried out nor in what concerns the way in which the labour process is organised. Hence, several typologies have been proposed (e.g. Taylor and Bain 2001; Batt and Moynihan 2002).

However, Taylorised workplaces are the dominant trend, as shown by many studies (e.g. Taylor and Bain 1999; Bono 2000; Buscatto 2002; Marques 2004; Santos e Marques 2006; Venco 2006) conducted within the framework of the labour process theory or not. As Taylor and Bain (1999, 107) stated, working in a call centre is like having “an assembly line in the head”.

In fact, these studies have revealed the similarities between call centre work and that one carried out in factories under the despotic regime of Taylor’s scientific management. Deskilling, highly standardisation, and task routinisation to control and replace workers more easily (Braverman 1998), lack of content of the work, strong scripting, operators without autonomy and initiative, intense pace of work imposed by the computer system, an adverse disciplinary regime, intensive performance targets that are constantly pushed up, large-scale surveillance, restricts opportunities for career progression, highly flexibilization of wages (with heavy reliance on performance) and working time (night shifts, extended working time), alienation, are at the heart of this industry, as well as an integrated system of control, mixing elements from the technical and bureaucratic types defined by Edwards (1979) with the normative control conceptualised by Callaghan and Thompson (2001, 2002), which is induced through training. These authors consider that technical control allows

management to camouflage control, inducing the idea that it is a product of the electronic system, aiming to avoid resistance.

For Barnes (2005), the control manifests itself in five areas: electronic surveillance; standardised work; emotional control; precariousness; and the space layout, being the emergence of the emotional control facilitated by the combination of the electronic monitoring with the standardisation of the interaction between customers and operators, representing the “commodification and objectification of employee emotions” (Barnes, 2005:182). In Portugal, Chambel and Castanheira (2010), found that some organisations put mirrors on the workstations so that operators can monitor their emotions.

As the required skills have a narrow scope and are basic, initial training is short-term (Bono 2000; Michel 2001; Thiri6n 2004) and continuous training is almost absent. Consequently, self-training and informal peer-to-peer learning assume a great relevance (Houlihan 2000). Besides the induction of the values of the organisation, training has a practice orientation concerning the equipment, the navigation on the IT system or the tasks to be performed, but essentially regarding service-oriented communication, as “one of the most important call centre skills is the ability of the operators to managed themselves and their emotions” (Thompson, Callaghan and van den Broek 2004:140).

In this sense, the production of relative surplus-value is dominant, but it is combined with methods of production of absolute surplus-value, mainly through the “housewifization” of work (Fuchs 2014a) or the extension of the working day.

In the survey conducted by Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe (2007) managers gave three reasons to explain this feminisation of the employment: women have a non-aggressive voice and behaviour; they are trustworthy; and they are very competent in handling with keyboards. For Fuchs (2014a), however, the explanation lies in the reproduction by the industry of the five types of housework that patriarchy assigns to women in the capitalist societies, while Nogueira (2009) through the concept of “double workload” highlights the close relationship that exists between the sexual division of labour in the production and reproduction spheres, showing that the setting up of part-time work supports the traditional sexual division of labour.

In sum, in the call centres both formal and real subsumption of labour under capital is a reality.

Working under this regime has very negative effects on the workers' health, both physically (musculoskeletal and voice disorders, etc.) and mentally (chronic stress, depression, burnout, mental fatigue, headache; etc.) as stated by many authors (e.g. Bono and Leite 2016; Chouanière, Boini and Colin 2010; D'Cruz and Noronha 2009). Not forgetting the "ethical sufferance" to which the operators are subject (Rolo 2013) as many times they are forced to lie. Chambel and Castanheira (2010) found high levels of "cognitive dissonance", because operators are obliged to express certain emotions with which they do not agree. For Roque (2013), they are slightly deaf, have their vision affected, are dependent on medication and, sometimes, are subject to weight gain or to sudden weight losses.

Control and resistance in the call and contact centres

Another divide in the studies opposes those authors influenced by the Foucauldian panopticon metaphor and those associated to the labour process theory, who state that although these workplaces represent "new frontiers of control" (Taylor and Bain 2001), they remain a "contested terrain" (Edwards 1979), because "these are moveable frontiers, not iron curtains of surveillance, and the presence and activities of trade unions can challenge these frontiers in various ways." (Taylor and Bain 2001:43).

In 1998, Fernie and Metcalf wrote a paper on the relation between pay systems and the characteristics of the organisations, which has become much better known by the authors' assertion that "'tyranny of the assembly line' is but a Sunday school picnic compared with the control that management can exercise in computer telephony" (Fernie and Metcalf 1998:2). The Panopticon idealised by Jeremy Bentham had become a reality. Therefore, any form of workers' resistance would be impossible.

In the same year, Knights and McCabe (1998), and in the next two, Houlihan (2000) and Taylor and Bain (1999, 2000) were the first authors to refute this thesis. The second paper of Bain and Taylor was based on a case study in a call centre where a union emerged although the workers were subject to a tight monitoring. The refutation was made according to

three axes: the management of the labour relationship is more complex than what those authors consider; the Panopticon operation is “far from perfect”; there is space for worker resistance, thus the emergence of a union in the workplace (Bain and Taylor 2000:11).

Since then, several authors have highlighted the existence of different forms of resistance. Following Barnes (2005) we may define it as any form of workplace action whose purpose is to contest management decisions. In this sense, resistance “assumes a dialectic with managerial control that is an outcome of antagonism between capital and labour within the capitalist labour process” (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999:2). It can be individual or collective, unorganised and informal in an everyday basis (Scott 1987) or formalised/organised, as well as active or reactive, overt or covert.

Resistance, but also accommodation that, for Barnes (2005), is a response of a defensive and in general passive nature to control, meaning an adjustment to the pressures of the management instead of challenging it. Resistance and accommodation are not opposed entities and the boundaries between them are “porous” (Barnes, 2005:5). They both imply a certain level of consciousness, and resistance implies a risk. Beyond resistance and accommodation, also misbehaviour, that is “anything you do at work you are not supposed to do” (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999:2), like making fun of the customer.

In the call centres as in other workplaces, “the hostility of workers to the degenerated forms of work which are forced upon them continues as a subterranean stream that makes its way to the surface when employment conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labor oversteps the bounds of physical and mental capacity.” (Braverman, 1998:104). And, as in other workplaces, we assist to a plurality of forms of resistance, covering a vast continuum (Bihl 1991).

Many authors (e.g. Knights and McCabe 1998; Houlihan 2000; Callaghan and Thompson 2001, 2002; van den Broek 2002; Taylor and Bain 2003; Mulholland 2004; Barnes 2005; Calderon 2005; Tine 2012; Roque 2013; Louçã 2014) have shown the existence of a great repertoire of individualised and informal forms of resistance that Callaghan and Thompson (2001) pointed out are common in this industry, due to the individualised and isolated nature of the work. Among the vast repertoire, we may cite turnover; absenteeism, as a time for the recuperation

of the workforce; the exploitation of holes in the electronic monitoring system; humour; workarounds; providing partial or incorrect information to customers; control of the workflow through ‘flicking’ customers, pretending to be on calls while the phone is switched off, terminating calls prematurely, remain “unavailable” for a period after the call has ended, exceed the time allowed for breaks; changing the tone of voice when dealing with customers; distancing from the client refusing to be “robots of seduction” (Calderon 2005); put minimal emotional effort into the work; “slammin’, scammin’ smokin’ an’ leavin’” (Mulholland 2004); etc.

Except for turnover, all other forms of everyday resistance mentioned above not only challenge control but can also provide a basis from which collective action can emerge. For example, Taylor and Bain (2003) refer the importance of humour to develop group identity. At the same time, examples of collective action arise, like a petition on a call centre where the management increased the workloads (Thompson, Callaghan and van den Broek 2004), or the protests against work intensification during team meetings (Knights and McCabe 1998).

In what concerns the unions, much of the available literature highlights its fragility. Several explanatory factors are presented: fear of reprisal (Mulholland 2004); the extreme vulnerability of the workforce (Bono 2000); the individualisation of the labour relationship (Tine 2012); the outsourcing and offshoring strategies (Bono and Henry 2008; Bono 2011, 2016), which places limits to trade union action, mainly weakening its bargaining power; as well as objective and subjective conditions which hinders solidarity and the consequent foundation of workers’ organisation (Huws 2009; Paul and Huws 2002). Given its weaknesses, sometimes the unions use other instances of workers’ representation to build collective action (Mazières-Vaysse 2013).

However, contrary to these assumptions, Bain and Taylor (2000) found that management’s actions can led workers to unionise. These authors even state that “call centres are fertile soil for trade union recruitment and organization” (Taylor and Bain 2001:41). For his part, Braga states that the factors referred by other authors to explain the lack of organisation and collective action “do not represent absolute obstacles to collective action [and that in] some cases, these conditions may, on the contrary, favour the outbreak of union mobilisation” (Braga 2014:42). The capability of workers to unionise and the unions to achieve success

it was also demonstrate by Brophy (2009) or Bramming, Sørensen and Hasle (2009).

In this debate, Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe (2007) highlighted that despite the similarities in what concerns the labour process between call centres across the countries studied, in the coordinated economies not only the employment and working conditions were more favourable, but the forms of collective organisation or the collective bargaining coverage reached much higher levels than in the other categories considered (liberal market economies or recently industrialised countries). And van den Broek (2002) found that the union density level has an influence on the type of resistance (individualised or collective).

Strikes also made their appearance in the industry. In the UK, the strike of 4,000 workers in 1999 (Taylor and Bain 2001); in Canada (Brophy 2009); in Brazil (Braga 2014); or in Argentine, where new more militant workers' organisations (unions or grassroot collectives) led various forms of collective action while traditional trade union organisations continued to show their passivity and negotiate collective agreements with provisions unfavourable to workers (Bono 2011, 2016).

The theory of mobilisation gives very useful contributions to highlight the social processes that underline collective action, particularly in what concerns the process of transformation of individual grievances into collective interests or, in other words, on how individuals become collective actors. It is also relevant to explain under what conditions collective action occurs, as it does not arise automatically, and the forms it takes.

Its foundations were laid by Tilly in 1978. Ten years later, Kelly (1998) drawing on the contributions of Tilly and other authors, namely McAdam (1988), introduced this conceptualisation in the field of the so called "industrial relations".

One of the main contributions from Tilly is his model involving five components: interest definition, organisation, mobilisation, opportunity, and action. For his part, one great contribution from McAdam is the idea that collective interests emerged when the workers perceive they are suffering an injustice.

Regarding the workers' definition of interests, two major questions arise (Kelly 1998, 27): how and why the sense of injustice is acquired; and how the workers develop a sense that it is a common issue.

The sense of injustice is acquired when the workers form a conviction that the employers are acting illegitimately. The shift from injustice to the definition of a collective interest involves, according to the theory, three processes: attribution, that is to attribute blame for the injustice to an entity; social identification, that is, the process by which an 'us' is constructed in opposition to 'them'; and leadership, with formal or informal leaders playing a key role in framing the questions aiming to promote the sense of injustice, while emphasising the need for workers to assert their rights and give a collective response to employers.

Thus, mobilisation and collective action depends on the definition of common interests and on organisation, but this is not enough. They also depend on opportunity, that is, facing to the employers' action deemed illegitimate, workers must have a sense of efficacy, that means they must feel they can change the situation by acting collectively within the existing balance of power.

Since the 1970s, even before the formulation of the mobilisation theory, there has been an interest in the study of grassroots union militants, involving various themes, among which their leadership. The works of Batstone (1977, 1978) for the UK and Benson (1991) for Australia are examples.

In his work, Kelly reassessed the role of leadership. However, for Darlington (2018), this reassessment has three potential ambiguities: on the construction of workers' interests, on the possible spontaneity of workers' action, and on the relationship between the union delegates and the workers; and two "important limitations": on the relations between the workers and the trade union officials and on the role played by left-wing activists in the process of mobilisation. These are shortcomings that other authors have tried to overcome.

Contrary to Atzeni's argument (2009), and following Gramsci, for whom "pure' spontaneity does not exist in history" (Gramsci, 1996:48), the role of leadership is critical in the mobilisation process. Fantasia (1988), refer that union delegates promote group cohesion; urge workers to take collective action and defend it from the employers' attacks.

Nevertheless, there are workplaces where union delegates are present and where there is no collective action. This raises two issues. The first one, is on the nature of the relationship between the workers and the

grassroots militants. The second is on the role of the union delegates with a militant orientation.

A good interaction is crucial. Drawing on several studies, Darlington states that union delegates that are accessible, that pay attention and respond to the workers' demands, listen them and make proposals, "are likely to be more effective in translating particular workplace grievances and injustices into collective action" (Darlington 2018: 626). In what concerns the second issue, Darlington reminds that union delegates that have a class orientation, reject "social partnership" and "business unionism" are more likely to foster collective action.

The contact centre of Energy

The contact centre of Energy is one of the oldest in Portugal. It was founded in 1991, employing four young women. In 2010, the number of workers was already 600 divided by two sites, one in Lisbon and the other in the centre of the country near the border with Spain, overwhelmingly having their employment contracts signed with a temporary work agency, who declared bankruptcy that year. With their jobs at risk, the workers in Lisbon did not watch the situation passively and undertook their first experience of collective action.

In line with the tendency worldwide, most of the workers are women, being close to 60.0% of the approximately 1 500 workers in Lisbon in 2016. In that year, their age ranged from 17 to 60 years. The wages were very low. There are three pay scales, the first one, which covers about 40.0% of the workforce, corresponds to the national minimum wage (€635 in 2020). The last one (after 36 months of contract) is more than €200 lower than the lowest wage in Energy, which was €1,000 in 2020.

The contact centre uses multiple channels of communication and has both front and back-office activities. The front office handles almost exclusively inbound activities, while in the back-office the workers deal with contracts, complaints, billing, fraud, switching, etc.. The hierarchy is flat with only three levels: project manager, coordinators, and supervisors.

Using the typology of Taylor and Bain (2001), this contact centre is in the quantitative part of the spectrum defined, what means that we are

in presence of an organisation that embodies a “mass production model” (Batt and Moynihan 2002).

Management developed the structural and normative control, what is manifest in the five areas of control referred by Barnes (2005).

Electronic surveillance is very intense and permanent through the extensive use of the computer-assisted performance monitoring. If the operators do not act accordingly, they suffer penalties. Moreover, punishment is frequent, even when the objective of the workers is to improve working conditions. A worker that reported a problem with the air conditioning system to the supervision and not having seen it solved, spoke directly to the maintenance department, having been scolded for that. When a worker is redeployed from the back-office to the front office, that is seen as a punishment, according to João³.

Jobs have very low quality. The work is highly standardised and routinised, and the operations performed have a narrow scope, are elementary and repetitive, with few exceptions. The operators do not have any autonomy. All procedures must be followed in what concerns the contact with the customers. They cannot influence either the decision on the pace of the work or the work methods. Even, they cannot decide to take a break when they need it, with the supervisors exercising a deep control of the operators' breaks.

Given the limited range of skills, initial training is short-term. It has a practice orientation and does not neglect the socialising function aiming to ensure the operators behaviour will be the appropriate one, according to the patterns defined. Therefore, self-training and informal peer-to-peer learning assume a great relevance. However, the mutual help between employees is not always possible, because of the workflow. Sometimes the workers refuse to help their colleagues, as if they did so, they would not be able to manage their own work effectively. These situations create a bad atmosphere in the workplace.

Due to the intense workflow and to the monotony of the tasks performed, work is very exhausting. For Laura, “there is an atmosphere of (almost) psychological terror”. In the back-office the teams have been reduced over time without the missing elements being replaced, what implies an intensification of the workload for those who remain. With this

3. The name of the workers was anonymized.

increasing volume of work, it become more stressful and there is an accumulation of pending cases, so the “real” work of the assistants is not to solve the cases, but above all to avoid non-compliance with the deadlines imposed by the public entity that regulates the sector for the resolution of the complaints that are presented by the consumers.

In the front office, operators complain that the pace of the calls is very intense, what does not prevent supervisors from putting even more pressure on them aiming to decrease permanently the Average Talk Time (ATT) to increase productivity. This pressure to discipline the workforce to achieve the organisation’s objectives is applied daily and at briefings exclusively convened for this purpose and “not to listen the workers, as what we think doesn’t matter” (Francisco). For this worker, the intention to intensify the work does not consider the existence of several constraints, such as the IT system slowness or the loss of access to certain applications, that happens sometimes, or the level of complexity of some issues that are addressed. As a result of the fact that “supervision is very strict on ATT”, the workers “often cry and regret the situation among them” (Fernanda).

Supervisors are viewed as “true foreman” (João). They often threaten the workers, using inappropriate language and an aggressive behaviour aiming to ensure that the operators comply with the objectives imposed by the management. Workers think that certain situations can be seen as harassment: “they shout at the operators and humiliate us. They only see numbers.” (João). It was also referred a case of a worker with a problem in the eyes that asked not to sit near the windows, a request that was denied by the supervision despite his protests. For João, this is a consequence of a “great lack of education and of a weak professional attitude” and not because the supervisors are the bosses’ watchdogs. Cases of discrimination were also reported. Catarina synthesizes well the daily work life in the contact centre:

“It is a very stressful job. The operators are exhausted. The volume of calls is very high and there are peaks, so sometimes the working day is extended. The work environment is degraded, with a lot of noise. There is a lot of pressure from supervisors, a lot of evaluations and any mistake implies a discount on wage. There is little tolerance from the hierarchy.

Calls are recorded. They hear the calls, and if there is any problem, the supervisor calls the operator immediately.”

Emotional control is induced through training, as seen before, but also through other mechanisms, and led the operators to involve themselves in “emotional labour”, acting in the interaction with the customers in a way that is deemed appropriate by the employers. This contact centre is a good example of how operators must deal with this kind of control. They are not only trained in how to manage their emotions, as they are also faced with predefined answers they must give to customers and, inclusively, with the prescription of what they can and cannot say.

Control is also effective through precariousness in its several dimensions: working conditions, employment, and social rights. As mentioned, the great majority of the workers have a contract with a temporary work agency. So, they are not employees of Energy and they do not have the same rights that the employees of this company have. The wages are lower and the same happens with the meal allowance. Besides that, the workers are not covered by a collective agreement; they do not have the right to profit share nor to have a pension supplement; they do not have a discount on the energy tariffs; finally, they do not have access to the occupational health service which is provided by a company that belongs to the Energy group.

The company that has net profits ranging from a maximum of €1,125M in 2011 to a minimum of €876M in 2018 in the last years is the one that reduces the number of employees (from 13,575 to 11,660 between 2006 and 2019) and promotes precariousness and overexploits not only the contact centre workers, but also workers in other areas of the business, by using several temporary work agencies, what also gives a contribution to the fragmentation of the workers’ collective.

Finally, like in many other situations, Taylorism also insinuates itself through the individualisation of work, symbolised by the way the space is organised, with the compartmentalisation of the workstations, which are separated from each other by large wooden dividers. This allows the managerial control and at the same time prevent interaction between the operators, which “is not well seen by the supervision”, although, as stated by Joana, “as the calls are dropping and there is a large volume of calls, there is not much opportunity for us to communicate”. The operators

end up enclosed and isolated all working day in a small space, sitting in front of a desk with a computer monitor, a keyboard, and a mouse, and wearing a telephone headset. In brief:

“This call centre is a cemetery of souls and mine is already buried there. It is a temporary, precarious, and badly paid work. We are alienated from the reality and we die there. More, we are treated like children.”
(João)

This interviewee refers to the games that the hierarchy promotes and where are include “the day of wearing the clothes backwards”; “the day when everyone in the same team wears clothes with the same colour” (since they are the colours of the temporary work agency’s logo); “the culture day” (decorating the workstation with objects brought while travelling in the country or abroad as well as to take typical foods from the Portuguese regions or foreigner countries); “the day of decorating the supervisor” and the “gala day: dress code, black tie”.

These games and other social and recreational events are part of the new hegemonic logics of domination whose purpose, similarly to what happens in training, is to enhance workers’ commitment to the organisation and improve their productivity.

In addition to the intense surveillance; high work rhythms; highly routine work; standardisation; lack of autonomy; low levels of complexity in the tasks performed; high emotional demands in the relationship with the clients; etc., another issue that workers face is the “terrible working conditions” (Fernanda). Sometimes it is cold while more frequently the heat is intense, due to problems with the air conditioning system. The workers claim that the air is frequently saturated. Some bought small fans to put in their workstations because of the heat. According to a worker, the saturated air causes apathy and sleepiness. For other is common the operators become aphonic and have headaches. Other problems arise from the use of carpets, as well as a result from the poor maintenance of the rooms and equipment. Computers, headsets and mice are public, because the places are not permanent. This fact brings up several issues in the field of occupational health and safety, as the equipment is not sanitized. Finally, the toilets are not sufficient, and in the canteen the number

of microwaves and seats are not enough, so many workers have to eat in the workstations.

Workers also regret not being heard about these matters and think that the company does not care about their wellbeing, because there is an industrial reserve army that can replace them if they choose to leave:

“It would be great if they create good working conditions. The workers should be heard. Listen to our complaints for better chairs, better tables, etc... They should take our suggestions. The workers would certainly feel much better.” (Fernanda)

“There is no concern about the wellbeing of the workers. Perhaps, there is the notion that if we are not well, we will leave, and others will come.” (Francisco)

Collective action in the contact centre of Energy

The data for abstention in political and social elections and all studies show that the levels of civic and political participation in Portugal are particularly low. The same applies to strikes, with several reports placing the country in the group of those where “industrial action” are at low levels (EUROFOUND 2008, 2013; Lesch 2015)⁴. The density rate is also low (15.3% in 2016) (ICTWSS 2019).

With such a low propensity for collective action and facing a regime based on coercive practices, but also in hegemonic ones aiming to obtain the consent of the workers, shaping what Burawoy (1985) called “hegemonic despotism” it is therefore not surprising that many call centres’ workers state that they do not participate in forms of collective action, although they face organisational characteristics that do not meet their objectives and expectations. It is the case of many workers interviewed by Teixeira (2014).

The reasons given are different, but the result is identical: the refusal to engage in collective action with the objective of changing the situation.

4. In another report dated from 2013, EUROFOUND placed Portugal in the category “Many conflicts or more than in previous years”, due to the intensity of the strike action during the period of the troika (EC-ECB-IMF) intervention (Curtarelli et al. 2013).

Exit (Hirschman, 1970) is the dominant attitude⁵. That means leave the organisation. Exit represents an escape from the problem, based on resignation but, at the same time, it could be a form of a silent protest. Another relevant attitude is loyalty, that is conformity with the domination and its passive acceptance. Many of the loyalists are workers for whom the exit is not possible, and voice has no effect. To the three attitudes enunciated by Hirschman, we must add apathy, if not even hostility, towards collective action. All these attitudes inhibit resistance, namely collective action.

We must underline that in these interviews, one worker that do not participate in collective action mentioned two important issues: the importance of achieving results with it and the relevance of having someone that leads the process.

However, in Portugal as worldwide, despite the coercive and hegemonic policies implemented, resistance continues to exist in these workplaces, as mentioned previously.

In the contact centre of Energy, despotic practices (manifest through the punishments, the strong control by supervisors or the high paces) and hegemonic ones (manifest through parties; games; commemoration of certain dates; promotion of thematic days) are implemented seeking discourage, if not strongly inhibit collective action. Some games have as “prize” leave work earlier. According to João, this situation:

“Creates a great rivalry between workers. There are already threats of confrontation between colleagues. There is a lot of aggressiveness, given the rivalry between teams. Yesterday there was a discussion between two colleagues from the same team. The atmosphere is conducive to that. (...) This is a strategy to increase productivity and divide workers”.

Aiming to avoid the creation of a collective identity, management also tries to control the communication between workers by rotating them among teams (in the back-office) or workstations (in the front office), as there are no fixed workstations. They are moved around, having to ask every day where they can sit, what even gives rise to conflicts between workers and supervisors and even between workers. As mentioned before, the workers are also often redeployed from the back-office to the front

5. Turnover even reach figures such as 136% registered in the period between 01/01/2012 and 30/06/2014 among outbound operators of the contact centre of a banking (Moreira 2014).

office. The control of the breaks and the lunch period is also an attempt to control the communication. However, total control is impossible, as the workers can communicate with each other outside the workplace, face-to-face or through online social networks, sharing information and developing common goals.

With all these unfavourable structural conditions, the process of collective action in this contact centre becomes even more relevant.

As noted, in 2010, the workers faced the bankruptcy of the temporary work agency that hired and placed them in the contact centre. They contacted a union representing workers in Energy and undertook their first experience of collective action, using several “repertoires” (Tilly 2006), like strikes, demonstrations, assemblies at the company headquarters, etc.. This experience – the first one in Portugal in a call centre – was successful, as the jobs and the (few) rights the workers had at the time were kept. Although, they had to sign a new employment contract with another temporary work agency.

The success of this experience is a key factor to understand the presence of the union in the workplace and how subsequent moments of collective action have become possible. The workers developed a belief that they could achieve results with collective organisation and action. Since then, the union, SIESI⁶, has organisation in the contact centre (in 2019 there were eight union delegates – five women and three men –, being four of them, all women, also members of the union’s National Executive Committee).

In 2012, after two years without wage increases, the wages growth 1.4% and remained unchanged until 2015.

In this year, the workers presented a set of demands based basically on three points: wage increase of €30 for all workers and the inclusion of the bonuses in the wage (“we want more for wages and less for bonuses!” – Leaflet of 19 April 2016); better working conditions and to sign an

6. SIESI – Union of Electrical Industries of Southern Portugal and Islands was founded in 1939, during the fascist regime of Salazar, six years after the entry into force of the National Labour Statute, inspired by Mussolini’s Carta del Lavoro. It was founded with the name of National Union of Electricity Workers, as a craft union. Like the other trade unions, it was strictly controlled by the regime. In the beginning of the 1970s it has participated in the meetings of IN – Intersindical Nacional founded in October 1970 in a semi-clandestinity condition and since the Carnation Revolution is affiliated to the class oriented CGTP-IN – General Confederation of Portuguese Workers.

employment contract with Energy based on the consideration that if they are “the voice of the company”, they should be its employees.

A document with these claims was sent to the management, but the temporary work agency did not answer. Considering this, the workers decided in assemblies to strike on 24 and 31 December 2015 and 4 January 2016. These strikes had a significant support, leading the temporary work agency to change its position, deciding to negotiate and presented a counterproposal. It was centred on a wage increase very limited to the workers of the Portuguese line and more substantial to the workers of the Spanish one, deepening the wage gap between the two groups of workers. For the workers of the Portuguese line the proposed wage increase was of €9 for the second pay scale (from €571 to €580) and €1 for the third (from €654 to €655), the one where most of the workers are located, keeping unchanged the wage of the first, which corresponds to the minimum wage (at the time €530), until its increase by law.

A second proposal was the increase of the meal allowance to €5,75 between June and December and of €6 from January 2017 onwards. A third, was a bonus of 20% to 30% of the wage, what illustrates the wage flexibility policy implemented.

In the first days of June, the workers refused these proposals in assemblies called by the union. Alternatively, they submitted two proposals that were refused by the management that decided to withdraw from the negotiations and unilaterally imposed its initial proposal of a wage increase of only €9 for the workers in the second pay scale and of €1 for those in the third.

The workers felt humiliated and in new assemblies decided to hold new strikes: on the 20 and 21 June (with an assembly at the headquarters of the temporary work agency on the 20th); and on the 25 and 26 July (with meetings with the political parties in the Parliament and assemblies in the workplace). With no answer from the management, they decided new strike movements for September 2016.

Thus, in 2016, following Tilly, we were in the presence of an opportunity, for triggering collective action, as in the contact centre there were in place a set of conditions: there were demands; a certain group identity, despite all the measures implemented to avoid it, favoured by the fact that it was not a greenfield site; and the feeling of injustice and humiliation resulting from the employer’s policy on wages, conditions. And there

was also the memory of the previous successful experience of collective action, which produced in the workers a sense of efficacy, which made them confident that they could also win this battle.

Essential to boost the emergence of this wave of strikes was the presence in the workplace of a union with a militant orientation, that reveals a high level of “unioniateness” (Blackburn 1967; Blackburn and Prandy 1965), what means that it has a strong commitment with the unions’ central principles and ideologies.

The union and its leadership in the workplace were critical in this context because they were able to raise awareness and mobilise workers, as well as to strengthen group cohesion by providing the necessary resources, framing the injustice, and making the attribution of blame for it, not only to the temporary work agency, but also to Energy. Evidence of that can be seen in the union’s leaflets or in its digital communication through the union committee’s blog or Facebook page:

“The workers’ struggle (...) in December 2015, and in January and February 2016, was decisive. Following the position taken, meetings were promoted with [the temporary work agency and Energy]. Unity makes us Stronger!” (Email of 10 March 2016).

“Having rejected any improvement in wages since the end of 2015, they are now (...) presenting insufficient and disrespectful proposals meaning a devaluation of the work carried out (...). We worth more than €0, €9 or €1.” (Leaflet of 16 June 2016).

“We are essential. We are excellent in what we do. We want recognition and fair retribution for our excellence.” (Leaflet of 16 June 2016).

“For the valorisation of work, against precariousness and lack of respect!” (Leaflet of 19 August 2016).

Mobilisation theory gives an extraordinary relevance to the role played by the militants in the workplaces in the processes of collective action. However, there is little research in what concerns the relationship between leadership and the workers. In the case of this contact centre, we are facing to a situation close to the one of a study, whose authors found that “members’ union loyalty and willingness to work for the union” were

associated to what they called a “transformational leadership” (Cregan, Bartram and Staton 2009:714).

The leadership is not only willing to develop solidarity and to mobilise the workers but has the necessary qualities to do so. In this sense, the workers interviewed emphasised a set of qualities of the woman that leads the union in the contact centre, stating that it is her that enhances collective action. One of the characteristics mentioned is her “charisma”; other is the great proximity she maintains with her fellow workers. Inclusively, everyone can have her phone number and call her whenever need. This assumes a great relevance, because it allows to strengthen the ties between workers and the union:

“The explanation lies in the union work and in the charisma of the union leader. The union managed to show that the problems belong to everyone and that everyone should be united and only in this way we can win. The humiliation doesn’t only affect the third-pay scale workers. We were all humiliated.” (João)

“Only SIESI has an active presence and the workers only trust in SIESI. A relationship of trust was established due to the work of the union leader, who is a very hardworking and very competent person who created very deep ties between the union and the workers. She is the union there.” (Francisco)

“The main catalyst is the existence of a union structure composed of people who have been in the company for years. And the workers have a lot of trust in the union leader. She has shown herself to be exemplary and has taken the union issue to heart.” (Joana)

“The workers have a lot of confidence in the union leader. She is very helpful and does not deny help. She is a trade unionist, a psychologist, a social worker, etc.. I often call her after dinner to let off steam.” (Catarina)

The movement continued throughout 2017 and during the strikes between 1 and 4 November that year, the workers made an assembly in front of the headquarters of Energy, with the company finally agreeing to meet with the union. In the same year, on the 24 December, the workers

strike again as part of a general strike of all contact centre workers with an employment contract with the temporary work agency.

New strikes arose on 2018 (8 May) and 2019 (14 and 19 June), as the temporary work agency continues to refuse to negotiate. The wage increase that have been registered are only due to the increase in the national minimum wage, which was €530 in 2016, rising to €557 the following year, €580 in 2018 and reaching €600 in 2019 and €635 in 2020.

Strike adherence has been variable, with the June 2016 strikes to be highly participated. A worker explains the variation in participation with several factors, mainly the low wages:

“The union is hopeful. It is true that, above all, the struggle of June 20 had an impact. But, personally, I wonder for how long this remains. First, low wages are an obstacle to more days on strike, and on the other hand, there are people who think that the union must do everything. We know that it is not like that.” (Joana)

More recently, in addition to the demands for wage increase, better working conditions and the integration of workers in Energy, they were also fighting against the relocation of work of the Lisbon operation to a town in the south of Portugal, with dozens of the workers that provide this service being informed of the possible extinction of their jobs and consequent dismissal.

The process is still open.

Besides the use of the mentioned repertoires of action, the workers have also undertaken other actions, like complaints made to the labour inspectorate or legal actions in the courts against the temporary work agency, when in 2015 it imposed working on June 13, a holiday in Lisbon. On that day, many workers refused to work. In the interviews it was also stated that there are workers who refuse to move from a workstation to other, as well as to work after logging on in a protest, for instance, because of cuts in the bonuses.

This case shows that collective action, including strike action among other repertoires, is possible even in the most difficult conditions, in workplaces where precariousness reigns and where elements of despotic and hegemonic regimes are implemented trying to prevent it. It also

highlights the crucial importance of having union delegates in the workplaces that act in order to reinforce the ties between unions and workers.

Conclusion

More than twenty years ago, Fernie and Metcalf postulated that worker resistance in the call centres would be impossible, due to the strict electronic surveillance implemented. This assumption was later refuted by many authors, who highlighted the existence of a set of resistance actions, individual or collective, overt or not, with or without union intervention. Nevertheless, some other research showed the fragility or even the inexistence of unionisation or union organisation in these workplaces.

The history of the labour movement shows that unionisation, the foundation of union organisation or collective action in the workplaces does not occur automatically. Effectively, there are many examples of initial difficulties which are sometimes only overcome many years later. This was the case of the unskilled workers that join unions decades after they were founded. Or the case of certain groups of workers that historically had always been quite distant from collective action and unions and now play a very active role in them. And it was the case in the contact centre of Energy where the first experience of collective action took place in 2010, almost twenty years after it has been founded. So, we must be careful in this matter, being therefore premature to state categorically that emerging industries will not unionise or will not take collective action.

As showed, in the contact centre of Energy are present many factors that hamper unionisation and collective action. However, they became possible, what happened under particular circumstances, i.e., when the factors that boost them can outweigh those which inhibit them. This is what happened in 2010 and in 2016 and after.

In this contact centre are present all the factors that the literature considers necessary to trigger forms of collective action. However, among them there are three key conditions: a sense of efficacy; the presence of a union with a militant orientation that organises and mobilises the workers; and the type of union leadership in the workplace.

This means that face-to-face communication remains essential, even though a union can also use computer-mediated communication. This is

an issue that is not mentioned, much less discussed, by the advocates of the use of this tool, like Castells (2013), according to whom the constitution of virtual communities favours the increase of discussion and mobilisation, or the ones on the cyber-unionism (Shostak 2002; Diamond and Freeman (2002); Freeman and Rogers 2002; Gutiérrez-Rubi 2009). All these authors are imbued with a “techno-euphoria” (Fuchs 2014b) and in an uncritical perspective, consider that Internet can replace the presence of the unions in the workplaces and at the same time give a strong contribution to their renewal.

Trade unions are in crisis. It is also a crisis of a certain form of unionism. Effectively, the union movement, in its main currents, long ago abandoned its character of a social movement in favour of institutionalisation, which led to its bureaucratisation, oligarchisation and capture by the capitalist system. This has meant the emergence of a low-quality relationship between unions and workers, which needs to be overcome through the implementation of a grassroots democracy, which is only possible if the unions are present in the workplaces.

If technologies are important and undoubtedly give a contribution to the revitalisation of the unions, it should be emphasised that ICT in general, and the Internet particularly, are not in themselves a panacea for overcoming the situation and they can in no way replace the union organisation in the workplaces. The union is the workers. A union does not make sense if it is not anchored in the workplaces and if workers cannot directly and openly contact it through their grassroots militants.

Moreover, the potential of these technologies can only materialise, if the investment made in them is creative and if they are an element of a strategy aimed at strengthening union organisation. Basically, this means that the technologies should be adopted in the framework of an “organising” strategy (Heery, Kelly and Waddington 2003). On the contrary, the implementation of ICT in the framework of the “services unionism” that is currently dominant can lead to the disinvestment of the unions’ presence in the workplaces, what will certainly cause more damage than the problems Internet apparently solve.

Another relevant issue for the union renewal this case study highlighted is related with the type of union leadership in the workplaces. In this contact centre, the leadership acts exactly on one of the Gordian knots of actual unionism, working towards the improvement of the relation-

ship between the workers and the union when trying to solve the daily life problems of each worker, combining this with the struggle for the human emancipation. The logic implemented is near the perspective of a “social capital unionism” (Nissen and Jarley 2005) with which there is an attempt to recreate the old work communities through the strengthen of the ties between workers and organisations.

In conclusion, by opting for a radically transformative strategy, the unions will have a future, even in the call centres and among the more recent platform workers.

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