

A UNI Report on customer
service professionals
and their unions



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June 2006

Global organising for call centre workers



Call Centre Action Month - October

Report



Cover photo:
Prudential call centre Mumbai, India
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Back page photo:
Call centre worker Mumbai, India
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Global organising for call centre workers

The young but fast growing customer service and call centre industry is already changing in the face of a new, global mobility revolution. Jobs already stripped out of corporate operations and brought together – often in areas of industrial decline - are now on the move again. They can be switched around the globe by fibre optic cable to create a global labour force who acquire new names and a knowledge of baseball or football to talk to customers half a world and many time zones away. It's the child of astonishing IT changes and globalisation. It's the product of a profound re-engineering of work that strips discretion down to a minimum and technology that permits constant targeting and monitoring of staff. It's a young industry with a young - and often female - labour force. Call centres are a far cry from the sweatshops of old - yet the work can be highly stressful, opportunities for career progression limited by a flat grading structure and staff turnover can be high. Many call centres are in-house operations but already a small number of key multinational sub contractors are emerging to offer customer services to a range of clients.

From the start the industry has created special challenges for workers and their unions. Greenfield sites with round-the-clock, shift working pose social challenges - and require new ways of union organising. The union committee with reps on each of a multiplicity of shifts provides the basis for democratic and comprehensive representation. Unions have already identified quality of service and decent work as key areas on which to focus, to provide job security and ensure core labour rights in developing centres. It is organisable and many centres are organised. But too many remain outside union protection. Unionised jobs are also under threat as offshore outsourcing grows - with many jobs going to developing countries without adequate consultation or job security at "home" and no guarantees of labour rights in the new offshore centres.

Call Centre facts ...

UNI's first ever Call Centre Conference - held in Athens on October 2005 - was given an insight into the findings of a two-year survey of the world's call centre industry being conducted by Cornell University, USA that will give unions some reliable data on which to base their strategies.

About 80% of call centre work is still done within national boundaries and three quarters of call centre work is currently done in-house - but outsourcing and offshoring are growing. The survey penetrates a world in which some call centre staff have to deal with 110 calls a day (India), where discretion over their work methods is restricted and calls often electronically monitored.

The average call centre employee is young, usually a woman and not likely to stay around long in some of the worst employers (staff turnover is 28% a year in India, 25% in the USA and 23% in the UK).

"These percentages under-state the true turnover figures," Cornell's Professor Rose Batt told the conference.

An Indian call centre worker is paid \$2,400 compared to \$28,000 in the USA and nearly \$42,000 in Denmark (but hidden costs do narrow this wage gap).

Training can be as short as nine weeks (India) and stress levels are increased by fluctuating "performance-based" pay that can make up to 18% (Netherlands) of income.

Banks, insurance and telecom companies are the biggest users of call centres (49% of the industry) but other significant users include retail and travel/leisure.

In some European countries unions are present in around half the call centres (Denmark, France and the UK) but the figure is 10% in the USA and nil in India. In the Netherlands 63% of call centres also have works councils.

Most call centres are small - except in the US where the average centre employs 254 people and India (547). The call centre industry in India is dependent on outsourcing - sub-contractors run 75% of call centres there.

The Cornell study - which has research teams in 20 countries - is only half way through with more countries yet to report. The project has moved into its second phase, interviewing staff, managers, unions and companies.

"The more unions at the national and global level work together the more they can influence the future direction of this industry," said Prof Batt.

Karthi Pillay, of CWU South Africa, reported on a survey by his union of the top dislikes of call centre workers in his country. The findings include unrealistic targets, repetitive and boring work, disrespectful supervisors, inflexible shifts with compulsory overtime and too few breaks, constant monitoring and surveillance, abusive customers - and low pay.



Professor Rose Batt, Cornell University

Global framework agreements with multinationals open door to labour rights and organising

First UNI Call Centre Conference ...

130 delegates from around the world attended the UNI Call Centre Conference, which was co-sponsored by the Workers Group at the International Labour Organisation and with the participation of the International Transport Workers Federation.

The conference identified stress as a major - and global - problem faced by staff in call centres, much of it caused by unrealistic and multiple targeting and from constant monitoring and surveillance.

Tackling the low levels of discretion in many jobs and the need to upskill staff were also identified.

Unions are being urged to step up cooperation at a national and a global level to recruit and organise customer service professionals and help ensure decent work.

The conference is the culmination of UNI's annual Call Centre Action Months (every October since 1999), the UNI Call Centre Charter to establish minimum levels of conditions and the UNI Offshoring Charter (both Charters were issued in August 2004).

UNI's Alke Boessiger reported on call centres guidelines signed with 42 European telecom operators in ETNO in June 2004 (within the European social dialogue) and urged national unions to ensure that these are implemented.

There were calls in Athens for UNI to work closely with other global unions involved in representing customer service professionals - including the ITF whose Gabriel Craciun reported on their call centre work among airline and transport companies.

Stronger membership numbers will help unions promote the agenda of customer service professionals and build decent work and quality service in the industry.

In many countries existing union structures have been extended to cover new customer service centres. In Greece the employees at COSMOTE - the mobile arm of Greece national telecom operator OTE - launched their own union. In India UNI has helped launch UNITES to bring together the fast growing offshored call centre and back office operations in India.

Global framework agreements with multinationals that guarantee core labour rights and open the door to organising are key - in Brazil the UNI agreement with major telecom multinational Telefónica has enabled telecom union SINTETEL to organise thousands of call centre workers there.

"Call centre workers should fully enjoy freedom of association, irrespective of their type of contract, location of work or any other social status," said Michihiro Ishibashi (ILO Workers Group). Where companies resist labour rights, complaints to the ILO could lead to pressure on governments, who are responsible for seeing that ILO Conventions and the Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work are enforced.



UNI's first ever conference for call centre workers was held in Athens in October 2005 - with the backing of the Workers Group at the International Labour Organisation (ACTRAV)



Telephone banking: First Direct Leeds, England - Christopher Thurmond/reportdigital.co.uk

Making progress ...

Matt Goodwin of the Australian trade union centre ACTU reported on the successful campaign to organise the Westpac call centre in Launceston, Tasmania where 83% of the staff are now union members with a committee of 12 trained reps.

Kleber da Silva reported on SINTETEL's successes in organising call centres in Brazil where call centre workers are paid just above the minimum wage, receive no or in-adequate training and where poor career prospects lead to high staff turnover. About half of Latin America's call centres are in Brazil and his union - the biggest telecom union in the region - has signed a collective agreement with Atento.

"Young people often don't see call centres as a career but as a transit in their lives," said Kleber. "A company's approach to its workers has a knock on effect on customers," he warned. "There are a lot of good reasons to be organised," said Eva Scherz, of GPA Austria, which has been campaigning with success for those with insecure contracts.

The Athens conference called for union organising drives and greater international cooperation to help workers around the world in this fast growing industry to improve the quality of their working lives.

International solidarity to avoid a race to the bottom as employers seek to move work around the world was highlighted - with the emphasis on ensuring that wherever work is outsourced or offshored, that work is unionised.

"Call centres are now a global production chain in services," said UNI General Secretary Philip Jennings. "That's why UNI global union has globalised its recruitment efforts."

The biggest round of applause from the 130 delegates came when Yacine Ndiaye, of SYTS Senegal, announced that her union is targeting a French-speaking call centre employing 800 people and where the use of temporary agency staff has been a recruiting problem. She told delegates of call centre staff having to adopt French names and change their accents so French customers didn't realise they were talking to a centre in Senegal. "They have lost their identity and their conditions are very bad."

Athens conference calls for union organising drives and greater international cooperation to help workers around the world in this fast growing industry to improve the quality of their working lives

Health and safety a key issue ...

Stress was identified as a major issue among call centre workers who are tightly monitored and targeted by conflicting performance measurements, who often work long and unregulated hours in jobs that can be monotonous and repetitive with few opportunities for promotion. "Stress exists in every call centre - there are no exceptions to this rule," said Dimitra Makri, who is President of the Union of Cosmote Employees in Greece (the first union in the world to be born in a call centre).

Unions in Australia and the UK have had successes in winning compensation for members affected by acoustic shock. The Communication Workers Union of the UK has won 100 cases and brought members affected more than £1million as a result of acoustic shocks - variously described as loud bangs, short screams or high pitched tones - sustained by call centre operators wearing headsets. They happen without warning, despite supposedly "intrinsically" safe headsets supplied by employers.

**"Stress exists in every call centre
- there are no exceptions to this rule"**

Improving the quality of working life ...

Delegates in Athens heard of substantial progress being made to improve the quality of work and tackle what Belgian delegate Claude Lambrechts called "the cowboys that are out there". In Telefónica in Spain the unions and the company cooperate in a training programme that provides at least 35 hours of off-the-job training a year and allows employees - who contribute to the training fund - to build up qualifications.

"The more qualifications you have the greater the possibility for promotion," said Vicente Bautista, of UGT Spain.

In France a new sectoral training agreement in Telecom has been signed with priority going to young people and women and offering call centre operators the opportunity to have a certificated qualification. "This is a first step in the Telecom sector and we want the certificates to be extended to other sectors, particularly operators working in the outsourced centres," CFDT's Franca Salis Madinier told the Athens conference.

French unions are also monitoring a government Social Label for call centres that aims to improve the image of the industry and encourage Corporate Social Responsibility. The scheme has financial incentives - companies with the label can apply for government contracts. "This is not a substitute for collective bargaining," said Franca, but it could help avoid cost squeezing.

Most call centre workers in France work in in-house operations, and are often covered by the enterprise agreement - but there are 60,000 in outsourcing companies with poor terms and little social dialogue.

Quality jobs are a major campaign issue for the Communication Workers of America, which is campaigning for the professional, high road model for customer service professionals, focusing on problem solving rather than reading from a script. Without union intervention many employers will adopt a low cost, low road approach - pitting employees against each other in a competitive race to the bottom.

"Our role is to promote high road customer service and block the low road," says the CWA's Larry Cohen - who is also World President of UNI Telecom. "The high road leads to meaningful work and good union jobs. The low road leads to the continuous movement of work in search of the lowest cost operation. The choice is clear."

Since Larry made those remarks Lloyds TSB has told its call centre workers to stop reading from scripts because it makes customers angry. A survey of customers showed that 90% of people get annoyed when talking to call centre staff who are obviously talking from a script. Most customers thought this led to staff failing to listen or to answer questions properly. Now staff are given templates to guide them through the main points they need when chatting to customers.



Target board being updated at Transworks
call centre Mumbai, India
Jess Hurd/reportdigital.co.uk

Tackling the global mobility revolution ...

The trend for service sector jobs to be relocated across national borders is already well established. India and China catch the headlines but some of the biggest recipients are much closer to home while other developing countries like the Philippines are establishing a presence in the global customer service industry.



Training new recruits: Infowavz Mumbai, India
Jess Hurd/reportdigital.org.uk

UNI-Europa launched the MOOS project (Making Offshore Outsourcing Sustainable) and in its first seven months tracked 15,600 outsourced jobs on the move and 14,300 new jobs. Most of the jobs went to India, Ireland, Hungary and other EU countries and they were mainly in IT services, software development, design and accounting. MOOS is funded by the European Commission's Social Fund with unions in six European countries so far reporting on a regular basis about offshoring activities. MOOS's next steps are to develop an offshore management handbook and design training courses for union reps.

Global multinationals (including airlines, banks and IT companies) are major offshorers of customer service work, both with in-house overseas operations and with subcontractors. Among the major global players in this subcontracting business are Accenture (USA), SNT (Netherlands), Atento (Spain) and Convergys (USA).

There is a clear trend to move from higher-cost areas of the world to those areas where wage levels are lower and where employment

conditions and employment rights may be poorer.

UNI produced its Offshoring Charter to help avoid narrow protectionism and to involve unions globally in a joint campaign to provide job security and the export of labour rights. Early dialogue is a key element in the Charter, to ensure companies fully understand the hidden costs of outsourcing and quality issues and give unions a genuine input in to corporate planning. The Charter also seeks to ensure labour rights in new centres around the world.

Some UNI affiliates - like Connect and Amicus in the UK - have already signed agreements with telecom and finance companies to ensure consultation, re-deployment and job security where work leaves the "home" base and to provide access to and labour rights for the new labour forces in countries receiving outsourced work.

Danielle Wiek-Meulman, of AbvaKabo Netherlands, told delegates of the saga of KPN's call centre work, which was done in house, was outsourced on cost grounds and finally returned on quality grounds. Her union is currently working to establish a decent collective agreement for those in Dutch outsource providers.

UNI action plan ...

Delegates to the UNI Call Centre Conference in Athens adopted an action plan that includes:

- Promote standards to tackle stress issues and improve skills levels.
- Build international standards for call centres.
- Global unions to build a multi-lingual database on call centres.
- Seek more global agreements with multinational companies to ensure worker rights.
- Step up cooperation between unions and global unions.
- Improve networking among activists with more space on the UNI website.
- Publish an Organising Booklet giving success stories from around the world.
- Biennial call centre conferences and seminars with focused agendas to support the UNI Action Month.



Action Months, Charters and Guidelines ...

● Global Organising Month:

UNI has coordinated organising activities in call centres across the world every October since 1999. Recruitment and campaigns benefit from the synergy of being global. Stickers, artwork, a special website and campaign bulletins are produced. "Standing in the rain outside a call centre in Ireland trying to recruit just got easier when you knew you are part of a world effort," one organiser told us.

● UNI's Call Centre Charter:

This Charter aims to set minimum standards - to help unions measure and identify the good and the bad employer and includes a set of broad principles for the call centre industry. Priority is also attached to increased training and development to provide customer service professionals with skills and product training to facilitate the development of meaningful careers and quality service for customers. The aim is broad based, portable and accredited training and skills development. The Call Centre Charter calls for performance targets that are based on providing high quality customer service and not solely on the quantity of calls taken or made.

● Joint European Guidelines (UNI-Europa Telecom and ETNO):

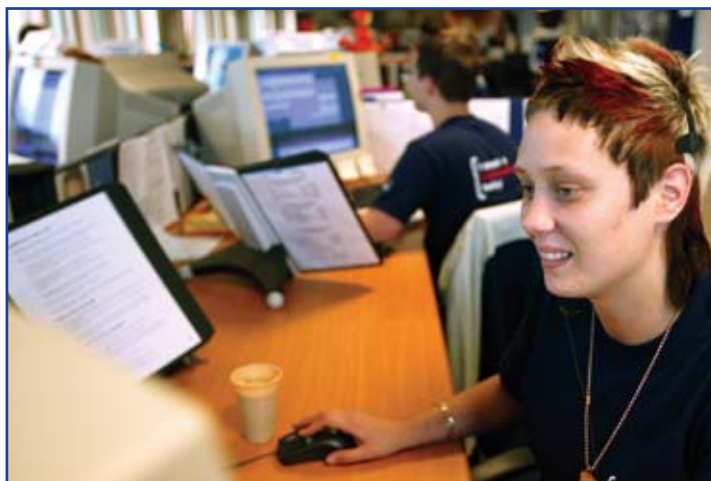
The ETNO guidelines between UNI-Europa telecom unions and European telecom operators provide for consultations over call centre strategy and policies. The guidelines embrace unions, collective agreements and works councils in the communication process over change. They also build in respect for the ILO's core labour standards. Essential to the success of the centres is the recognition that "employees who have a feeling of well being and security are likely to be committed to the customer and the company".

● UNI's Offshoring Charter

For trade unions "offshoring represents one of, if not the single, most important challenges over the next decade and beyond," warned a report for UNI Finance (The Offshoring of Call Centre and Back Office Operations - the Challenge for Trade Unions, by Scottish academics Phil Taylor and Peter Bain). In response UNI published an Offshoring Charter to tackle offshore outsourcing. The aim is decent work for all - in both outsourcing and insourcing countries - to avoid 'a race to the bottom' in pay and conditions.

The Offshoring Charter calls for:

- Prior negotiations to establish globalisation or offshoring agreements.
- Public policy support.
- Job security - with no compulsory redundancies.
- Re-deployment of displaced workers.
- Global labour standards.
- Decent wages.
- Minimum standards for call centres.
- Re-investment of savings from offshoring to finance skills development.
- Consumer rights to be protected.
- Long-term job security in insourcing countries.
- Management of change - in outsourcing and insourcing countries, involving governments, employers and unions.



Axa Sun Life call centre: Coventry, England
Paul Box/reportdigital.co.uk

Australia's Matt Goodwin (left) reports
on organising progress to the
UNI Call Centre Conference in Athens



Focus on stress in this year's Call Centre Action Month



Stop the BOSS!

¡Alto al BOSS!

Halte au BOSS!

**Schluss
mit dem BOSS!**



Call Centre Action Month: October

Stop the BOSS (Burn-Out-Stress-Syndrome)

The theme of this year's October Action Month in call centres focuses on stress.

Stop the BOSS (Burn-Out-Stress-Syndrome) is the slogan and this year UNI will be organising activities in conjunction with the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF).

Work has already started on producing a sticker, leaflets, posters and the rest in time for October and downloadable from a joint UNI-ITF action month website.

We will have stress-kits with a stress ball, simple stress relieving yoga exercises that call centre workers can do at their desk, the UNI call centre charter and, of course, the action month sticker.

UNI affiliates will be able to add their own logo to the UNI stress-kit.

On the action month website UNI and ITF organising stories from around the world will be posted and a blog will go live.

An organisers seminar is at the planning stage to bring together union organisers from all over the world to exchange their experiences on organising call centre workers and to learn new organising skills.

ILO call centre standard sought

UNI and ITF will be approaching other global unions with membership in call centres - including the IUF (hotel reservations), PSI (public service, electricity etc), IMF (IT) - to join us in our call centre organising efforts. We will also ask the ICFTU and ACTRAV to support us in our campaign for an International Labour Organisation standard for call centre workers.

www.uniglobalunion.org/callcentres

