

Call centres in South Africa: a labour perspective



Charley Lewis

Congress of South African Trade Unions

<http://www.cosatu.org.za>



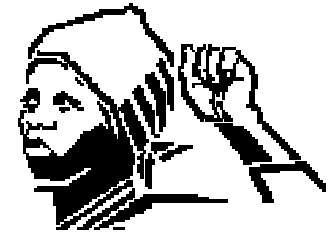
Call centres in SA: a labour perspective

Overview

- Call centres: some definitional issues, facts and figures
- Call centres: some general features
- Call centres: issues for workers and their unions
- Financial call centres in SA: a view from SASBO, the Finance Union
- Responses from unions: strategically engaging with call centres
- Some useful references

Call centres in South Africa: some definitional issues...

- *Call Centre or Customer Interaction Centre?*
(Technology integration / ICT convergence)
- When is a call centre a call centre?
 - >20 seats? >10 seats? >0 seats? ACD?
- Counting heads...
 - Seats vs jobs
- Call centres = telework?
 - Your workplace or mine?
 - Intermediation of ICTs



Call centres in South Africa: some facts and figures

- SA call centre spend (1999)
 - USD 90m (2%+ of SA IT market)
 - 1997 / 8 call centre boom (70%+ growth)
 - Move to smaller centres (15%+ growth)
- 350 call centres (>10 seats) accounting for 18 000 seats and employing ??? (BMI-T, 2000)
- SATelelink estimates 2 000 CICs with 60 000 agents (research in progress)
- International call centres?
 - Lufthansa CT: 120 local German-speaking agents, 3 000+ calls / day
- Touted to create 100 000+ jobs (Relocation ex India, NEDLAC report)



Call centres: some general features

- “Working in a highly structured but apparently informal working environment” – Andrew Bibby
- Flexible work patterns (shifts & part-time)
- High staff turnover
- High % of young / women workers → no history of unionisation
- Employer antipathy to unions (“green field”)
- Flat hierarchies without long-term career pathing
- Atomisation of staff - environment militates against collective voice



Call centres:

issues for workers and their unions (1)

- “Telework is sweet poison” - Walter von Lampe, Works Council member
- “Call centres are the electronic assembly lines of the new economy” - Phil Jennings, Union Network International
- Targets and quotas
 - imposed rather than negotiated (SASBO)
 - 90% of staff concerned at “levels” (UNIFI)
 - 40% of staff say targets are “unachievable” (UNIFI)

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Call centres: issues for workers and their unions (2)

- High levels of stress
 - identified as a major problem area (UNI)
 - due to pace of work, targets, monitoring, working hours
 - leads to high staff turnover (30% p a is common)
 - must be treated as a “work organisation” issue, not an individual employee problem
- Training & qualifications
 - UNI-Europa / EU project
 - Skills Development & Skills Development Levies Acts (SA)
 - Services SETA (Sector Education and Training Authority) has a call centre section (SA)
 - IT National Qualifications Framework: call centre standards recently issued for comment (SA)



Call centres: issues for workers and their unions (3)

- Surveillance and monitoring
 - SA call centre manager: “a highly monitored and measured environment”
 - 78% of US firms record & review employee communications (AMA)
 - UK employers now have “routine access” to employee e-mails and phone calls (CWU)
- Health, safety and work environment issues
 - “noise sensitivity” caused by sound spikes (Workers Online)
 - Repetitive strain injury (SASBO)
 - Provision of childcare facilities
- Salary issues: levels and structure of pay
- Working hours / shifts / benefits



Financial call centres in SA: a view from SASBO, the Finance Union

- SASBO on call centres: “rapid growth” “a new ball game”
- Organises 5 bank call centres with 200 formal jobs (excluding part-time & outsourced staff)
- Historically the dominant union in the sector
- The right to organise recognised by the employer
- Already-unionised staff were transferred into new call centres
- Few right of access problems reported (despite security, shifts)
- Rate of unionisation?
 - 50% (SASBO) vs 24% (own research)
- Issues for the union:
 - Number of working hours
 - Imposition of standards and quotas (quality of work)
 - Health, safety and environment (RSI)

Responses from unions: from Luddism to Strategic Engagement

■ Typology of Union vs Management Approaches

	Sweatshop Management (hostile to union)	Permanent Innovation Management (long-term win-win strategy)
Union: Distributive Concerns (fight for what the union can get)	Hard-line collective bargaining for maximum wage and job security benefits	Hard-line collective bargaining resulting in missed opportunities for greater wages and benefits
Union: Strategic Concerns (strategic unionism, proactive engagement)	Proactive attempts to address management's profit concerns through process innovation without job displacement or wage reductions	Proactive attempts to work with management in process innovation and new information technology implementation and adaptation, leading to skills upgrading, improved benefits, job enrichment

adapted from *Carnoy, Pollack & Wong (1993)*



Responses from unions: strategically engaging with call centres

- Recognise the changing global economy
- Recognise the changing nature of work
- Develop strategies for a highly controlled environment with high ICT penetration
 - Flexible work demands flexible organising
 - Provide both services and solidarity to members
 - Focus on issues appropriate to the environment
 - Seek labour legislation, collective agreements to cover tele-work
- Respond globally to globalisation
 - “Online Rights for Online Workers” campaign (UNI)
 - “Online Rights for Shopstewards” campaign (COSATU)
 - Enforce the social clause in trade agreements
(to counter effects of “social dumping”)
- Respond to future challenges (eg ACD-enabled home-work)



Some views from the shopfloor...

- “Bringing up two children and working full-time as a teleworker is not easy”
 - *Sabine V, Works Council member*
- “There has been job loss attached to [call centres]... a considerable number of bank branches closing with the stated reason being ‘electronic banking has replaced this service’”
 - *Finsec, New Zealand*
- “Even within the digital economy, employment requires protection”
 - *Kurt van Haaren, German Post Trade Union*



Some useful references

Union Network International:

<http://union-network.org>

SASBO, the Finance Union:

<http://www.sasbo.org.za>

BMI TechKnowledge:

<http://www.bmi-t.co.za>

SA Professional Call Centre Resource:

<http://satelelink.com>

ITWeb, The technology News site:

<http://www.itweb.co.za>

Organising in Financial Call Centres:

<http://www.eclipse.co.uk/pens/bibby/ofcc1.html>

Trade Unions and Telework:

<http://www.fiet.org/Info/telework.htm> or

<http://www.eclips.co.uk/pens/bibby/fietrpt.html>

New Techniques and Technologies of Surveillance in the Workplace:

<http://www.msf-itpa.org.uk/juneconf3.shtml>

FinSec (NZ):

<http://www.finsec.org.za/campaigns.html>

Discussion forums (tele-work & call centres):

<http://www.forum-arbeit.de/Forum/>

The Challenges of the New Economy:

<http://www.fiet.org/ibits/8ICTforum/Documents.htm>



Thank you...



An Injury to One is an Injury to All!