

Britain: Union hotline reveals widespread exploitation of call centre staff

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Callers have deluged a telephone hotline set up recently by the Trades Union Congress to monitor the working conditions in call centres across the UK.

The TUC set up the hotline for two weeks from February 12. In the first week of its operation the hotline received almost 400 calls, and by February 21 had received 550. The calls were mainly from staff who spoke about bullying, long working hours, impossible sales targets and their general dissatisfaction with their jobs in call centres.

The calls documented a sweatshop scenario, with employers in the industry using numerous techniques to drive up the exploitation of staff and in some cases openly breaking the law.

Some of the calls detailed the very harsh conditions faced by call centre workers, who are forced to work under constant surveillance, whereby every single hour, minute and second of their working day is monitored and recorded.

* In one case a manager made staff sign a "toilet book" to check how long they were spending away from their desks. He warned that the workers who spent the most time in the toilet would be forced to wear nappies/diapers.

* One caller said they had been forced to go into work to report sick in person rather than phoning; had to put their hand up for permission to go to the toilet and were only allowed three seconds in between answering incoming calls.

* Another call centre worker told the hotline that he was disciplined for leaving a six-second gap between calls.

* Other workers complained of suffering from "acoustic shock" (damage to hearing caused by sudden loud noises during phone calls) that had left them suffering from depression and other health problems.

* In another case, a worker related how call centre managers would not allow Christmas decorations to be displayed, claiming they were a health and safety hazard.

* Other callers told the hotline that they had to pay for their own headsets or had wages withheld while they served "probationary" periods.

Prior to the hotline campaign the TUC issued a report on call centres entitled "It's Your Call," which documented more grotesque examples of exploitation and the inhumane humiliation of workers.

One example in the report was of a worker who fainted at his desk and then had the time it took him to be driven to hospital deducted from his wages. In another case, a health representative at a call centre was suspended for using the company's phone to contact the health and safety executive about a gas problem. The report cited the case of a female employee who wanted to start her shift three-quarters of an hour late because of the time it took to get her children to school. The woman had to produce a letter from her child's school before her employees would consider the "concession".

The ongoing development of computer technology and advanced monitoring facilities enable call centre managers to monitor every aspect of an employees' working day. One software company has even used the slogan "Total Control Made Easy" to advertise its call centre monitoring package.

Systems such as Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) enable managers to view a print-out of call handling times as well as an employee's "wrap" (the time spent dealing with a customer's problem after they ring off). They also have access to the statistics showing the exact time spent away from the phone, such as toilet breaks or getting drinking water from the water cooler. Some contracts stipulate that such breaks must not

exceed 10 percent of the working day.

Alongside the emphasis on an individual's performance at work, many call centres also operate rigid "team" structures. The teams and individuals within them are then encouraged to compete against other teams, and against one another within their team, to reach the highest possible target levels set by management.

Some companies set a minimum number of hours "talk time" each day that an employee must be actually talking to customers, and will also set a minimum number of calls that must be taken each day or on each shift pattern. Failure to meet such, often impossible, targets may result in a worker being disciplined or even dismissed.

This intimidation and harassment intensifies the stress that call centre staff face every working day due to the sometimes abusive nature of the calls that they must routinely deal with.

Some of these issues are being aired in a TV series that is currently showing called "Get Me The Manager". Although the tone of the programme is to show call centre employment in a somewhat light-hearted manner, it still reveals the intolerable level of abuse that can be directed at staff from those on the other end of the phone lines and the constant pressure they are placed under by management.

In the last decade, call centre employment in Britain has sky rocketed. There are now more than 400,000 call centre employees, and accounts for 1 in 50 of the British workforce. By 2008, that figure is expected to reach 1 in 30. About 70 percent of call centre employees are women. Call centres are now the fastest growing employment sector in the UK, and the industry employs more than the combined number presently working in coal mining, steel and car production.

A survey by market analysts Datamonitor published in January 2000 estimated that call centre employment throughout Europe would increase by 12 percent over the next three years. Datamonitor estimated that a total of 1.3m Europeans would be working in call centres by 2003.

Many companies have established call centres to shift customer services away from their High Street stores into a smaller number of sites, and in the process cut costs. The advent of cheaper "lo-call" phone calls has also meant that companies can set up "Help Desks"

where customers can talk to staff on a local call rate.

The companies tend to locate their centres in economically depressed areas with a surplus of cheap labour that can be employed on casual, flexible contracts. Many companies receive government subsidies and tax breaks for doing so. First Direct, a subsidiary of the HSBC bank, initially set up its call centre operations in Leeds, West Yorkshire. The company has now opened a new centre in Hamilton, Scotland, where employment costs are more than £2,500 (\$4,000) cheaper per employee.

Call centre workers are among the worst paid employees in Britain, with some earning less than 60 percent of the national average wage. Call centre pay averages £12,850 - £9,000 per year less than the average wage. In many cases, wages include "bonus" elements that can change drastically from month to month, meaning that a steady wage cannot be attained.

Due to the stressful nature of the industry there is a very large turnover (30 percent) of staff, with workers staying at a firm less than 18 months on average.



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