

“We are not going to die in our cubicles!” – Wildcat strikes erupt at call centers across Brazil

Our reporters
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Since last Thursday, March 19, thousands of workers have been mobilized in a series of wildcat strikes and protests at call centers in cities from the north to the south of Brazil. They have stood up against unsafe working conditions in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. This movement is part of a global wave of wildcat strikes, including at automobile factories in Italy, Spain and the United States and in other industries elsewhere.

Among the first protests to erupt was one that challenged the Italian-based transnational AlmaViva, which has call centers in 11 Brazilian cities and employs 37,000 workers across the country.

Three days before the protests began at AlmaViva in Brazil, the Italian newspaper *Agenzia Italia* had reported that the company’s 2,800 workers in Palermo were organizing a mass strike, demanding the closure of the call center there after a confirmed case of COVID-19 among the operators. The next day, the Palermo headquarters was shut down and home office service was implemented.

AlmaViva workers in the city of São Paulo, where a protest and work stoppage took place last Friday, reported to the WSWs that they learned that the center in Italy had been closed due to the pandemic. One of them, Ingra, said: “It was very strange for a multinational like AlmaViva. They should have absorbed the experience of what had happened in Italy, but they really didn’t have any reaction.”

AlmaViva’s attitude was the same taken by absolutely every telemarketing company in Brazil. They ignored World Health Organization warnings and guidelines, as well as the disastrous results they have already seen in other countries, and forced the continuation of regular operations, even after the coronavirus had already infected thousands of people in Brazil and there were cases within the companies themselves.

Brazilian workers, however, quickly assimilated the international experiences and realized that, like workers in other countries, they were being forced to work under extremely dangerous conditions

“At the beginning of last week a lot of buzz was going on, because obviously the images we are getting from the rest of the world are shocking. Like it or not, globalization brings this kind of ‘problem;’ people know what’s going on,” 24-year-old operator Elias, also from AlmaViva in Brazil, told the WSWs.

The coronavirus crisis vastly exacerbates what are already inhuman working conditions in these centers, turning them into death traps. “It’s a call center, that old story, a lot of cubicles all close to each other, an environment with about 100 people, totally closed, without windows because of the noise,” said Elias.

Another AlmaViva operator, Cris, 28, reported to the WSWs that one of her colleagues is hospitalized with a suspected case of COVID-19. “I do believe there is some case [at the company], it just hasn’t been discovered yet,” she said. “Because we who work in the call centers go to work with colds, with migraines, with pain, because if we miss one day, we already feel it in our pockets.”

Elias reported that the only measure taken last week by AlmaViva was “from Tuesday, or Wednesday, they put out an all-purpose cleaner and a rag, and at shift change they let us clean ourselves and our cubicles and then pass the same cloth and the same cleaner to the others. The supervisors had no information. We wanted to know if there would be a shutdown, and they said nothing.”

Some at-risk workers, like Ian, who suffers from respiratory diseases, stopped going to work. “I was the first on my team not to go in and then find a way to justify this absence,” he said. “It’s really a feeling that either we fight alone for our health and suffer retaliation from the company, or we die in our cubicles.”

On Thursday, AlmaViva operators in São Paulo began to organize a strike through a WhatsApp group. Elias said that “in the middle of Thursday, they added me to a strike group, and during the last break of the day they distributed several leaflets. By the end of the day, this group had gathered over 250 people.”

The company tried to suppress the movement. Elias reported that he and his colleagues met on Thursday afternoon when the sector coordinator stated that “basically, what matters to the company, above all, is their profit. They couldn’t just stop operations and keep us at home getting paid. So if operations were suspended, we wouldn’t be paid anything.” The coordinator also said that they would implement home office measures, but that “of the operation we are part of, which has about 100 people, only 10 would do it.”

“I was revolted,” said Elias. “Obviously I wasn’t silent and I asked, ‘Okay, all you’re talking about is what your employer told you to say, but what do you think? With this cleaner, or this hand sanitizer you’re bringing, we’ll be safe? Do you really believe that?’ And then the guy said if he suspended us, we’d be out of pay. Then another coordinator called me to a corner to say I didn’t even know what a pandemic was, for me to be agitating people. It’s so unfair.”

Despite the company’s attempt to terrorize the workers, they joined massively in the next day’s work stoppage. Over the weekend, they continued to discuss on social media how to continue the movement in the coming days.

As Cris stated, “It’s not just São Paulo; in several cities in several states they have stopped work. It is necessary to take care of the

employee's health. Today the company sees us as a number... So the strike is not only to make a fuss, or not to work. We are claiming our rights and to not have any problems in the future with our health and that of our loved ones."

The stoppages that broke out across the country occurred in multiple centers of the same companies, several of them belonging to transnational corporations like AlmaViva. There are some even larger ones, such as Atento, which in Brazil alone employs more than 80,000 workers and has over 70,000 more employees in 12 different countries. The centers of these companies usually gather together thousands of workers, mostly young, who are then divided into the so-called operations. They receive the lowest possible wages, which are regularly discounted and are below the minimum stipulated by Brazilian law of R\$ 1,039 (around \$250 dollars) a month. One worker, for example, reported receiving about R\$700.

At an AlmaViva center in Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, which serves Banco Itaú, a company representative declared to workers protesting on Friday: "AlmaViva, the leadership, top management, plus Itaú and the government are involved and concerned about the coronavirus scenario." He was interrupted by booing from the angry workers, who know that this is a lie. In addition to the centers in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, between Thursday and Friday protests and strikes broke out at AlmaViva in Teresina, Piauí in Brazil's Northeast, as well as in Guarulhos, also in the state of São Paulo.

In Goiânia, the capital of Goiás in the center west of the country, thousands of workers walked off the job on Thursday and took over 136 Avenue, where large telemarketing companies like Atento and BTCC are based. They then blockaded the nearby federal BR 153 highway. Other wildcat strikes and protests were registered in Recife, Pernambuco; in Salvador and Feira de Santana, Bahia, both in the Northeast; in Curitiba, Paraná in the south; and other cities in the state of São Paulo, such as the municipality of Poá and Bauru.

These protests and strikes were organized independently of the corporatist unions. After the mobilization of the workers, the National Federation of Workers in Telecommunication Companies and Switchboard Operators (Fenattel), linked to the CUT, the union confederation led by the Workers Party (PT), stated that it had contacted the companies to ensure that care was taken about the transmission of the coronavirus. They have, in fact, only established measures--such as making hand sanitizer available and advising employees to wash their hands--to allow the companies to continue operating.

Asked about the union, Elias said, "I don't think it's fair for me to take a stand on [their] work because I don't know what they're doing. But I haven't had contact with anyone from the union, nor have I heard about them. You said they stated they were in contact with the company... with the company, not with the workers."

Roma, an operator of Tel Telemática, from Feira de Santana, in the interior of Bahia, reported to the WWSW that there "were demonstrations between Thursday and Friday in front of the company, asking that the activities stop." He reported that "the union went there only once last week."

"To tell you the truth, I don't even know who they are," he said. "They only go there at elections and I really don't know what they do... Oh, they receive the dues from our wages." Asked if the union comes as soon as there is an uprising in order to calm down the workers, he answered: "No doubt about it... and then they disappear."

In another center run by the company where Roma works, in Salvador, the capital of Bahia, workers went on a wildcat strike on

Thursday and Friday. Bypassing the union, they formed a rank-and-file committee. "We, from the employees' committee, are representing more than 2,000 people," one member said. The union came later and said it would negotiate safer conditions with the company, so that the work could continue.

Operators in Salvador have also created a page of denunciations on Instagram, called senzala80, where they use the slogan: "What right have you had stolen from you by the call center companies? We don't have ties to the union, we don't believe in them, we are proletarians like you." The page tried to pressure the governor of Bahia, Rui Costa of the Workers Party (PT), to close all call centers in the state. However, all their comments were deleted by the governor and they were blocked.

The page replied to the governor in a post: "Your quarantine is selective. We have to die because we are poor, we have to stay in that company in Boa Viagem (neighborhood) and bring disease to our families. There are already infected people inside. This is going to be a tragedy foretold."

The response of Rui Costa's government, together with the CUT unions, shows the degree to which the Workers Party is committed to guaranteeing capitalist profit interests. Their actions complement those of the country's fascist President Jair Bolsonaro.

Bolsonaro responded to the wave of protests by revising the decree defining what services were essential during the coronavirus epidemic to include call centers. This legislation allows for the "determination of compulsory realization" of this activity, suspending workers' right to strike and including the threat of force to make workers go back into the centers.

This repressive measure has been questioned by operators. The workers understand that "there are some specific call centers that make sense to continue in a period of necessity, such as the one that serves health plans, because they would be essential," as Elias said. But this is absolutely not the content of the decree. "The government has set precedents for a company like AlmaViva to decide that I will continue, during a pandemic, to sell plans for [the telecom company] Vivo."

Cris also contested: "Are you telling me that the telemarketing of private companies such as AlmaViva, TMKT, Saitel, Tivit, Atento, among others, is an essential service? It is not." Ian added: "Without active offering (sales service), Brazil doesn't stop, only the big companies stop profiting. The world may be disintegrating and they still want to make us beat our goals."

The profit interests of transnational corporations are in direct conflict with the social interests of the vast majority of the global population. The Brazilian working class will be able to defend its health and living conditions through the coronavirus crisis only if this struggle is fought internationally.

After finding the WWSW, a Brazilian call center operator called upon his colleagues: "Let's collaborate. Let's show our reality there. The site is worldwide." We strongly endorse this advice.



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