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Working at the interface: call centre labour in a global economy

ABSTRACTS

Working at the interface: call centre labour in a global economy

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ABSTRACT

Introducing this volume, this paper describes the contradictory nature of many aspects of call-centre work, drawing on the results of the EC-funded STILE project to demonstrate the difficulties of classifying call-centre workers. The lack of a clear objective 'place' in the technical division of labour and the social order for this transient and poorly-defined workforce is mirrored by a subjective failure, on the part of call-centre workers, to identify themselves as such. This makes it difficult to develop stable collective occupational identities that could form a basis for organisation and representation. Such conflicts are exacerbated by call-centre workers' position 'at the interface' between companies and their customers and between the local and the global. Many are also having to deal with the difficult transition from other types of work to call-centre work as the process of 'callcenterisation' sweeps through the public sector as well as private companies. The paper concludes by noting that, despite many similarities between call centres across the globe, national industrial relations systems and other aspects of particular locations still make a significant difference to the working conditions of call-centre workers.

Global or embedded service work? the (limited) transnationalisation of the call-centre industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the amount of 'real' internationalisation in the call centre industry and looks at its effects on work organisation from two angles. First, we analyse the data from the Global Call Center Industry Project, with regard to the amount of internationalisation and

the profiles of call centres serving an international market. Then, these industry-wide findings are confronted with a case study of the customer service operation of a US-based electronics multinational. Overall, while global business service providers exist and shape the perception of the industry to a considerable extent, internationalisation is chiefly limited to younger, larger subcontracting companies with standardised work, although national patterns vary. While some services in some segments have certainly been internationalised (for example airline travel reservations and IT helplines), language and cultural proximity continue to matter.

Experiencing depersonalised bullying: a study of Indian call-centre agents

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the concept of depersonalized bullying to explain the way in which call-centre agents employed in international call centres in Mumbai and Bangalore, India experience their work as an oppressive regime. The characteristics of this bullying regime can be attributed to the service level agreement between employers and clients which determines organisational practices. Call-centre agents’ professional identities and material gains facilitate their acceptance of their tough work conditions, causing them to participate in their own oppression. As well as clarifying the concept of depersonalised bullying, the article highlights the critical role of capitalist labour relations in workplace bullying, allowing for a contextualised and politicised understanding to emerge.

Looking behind the line: privatisation and the reification of work in a Brazilian telecommunications company

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the results of a case study carried out in the call centre of a public Brazilian telecommunications company. The study focused on the working conditions of operators engaged in telemarketing, an activity that relies on computerised data processing as its main working tool. Information was collected on the perceptions of managers and employees of the informatisation of working procedures and of the new forms of management that were adopted to enable these processes to be handled using the new technologies. The analysis was guided by the hypothesis that the application of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) in the context of changed organisational parameters inspired by the so-called ‘participative administration’ approach, has enabled a new kind of exploitation of living labour to emerge, one that is marked by an expropriation and commodification of workers’ knowledge, in its cognitive dimension.

Double workload: a study of the sexual division of labour among women telemarketing operators in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the sexual division of labour both in the workplace, that is, in the space of production, and in the home, which is termed the space of reproduction. The author discusses the close relationships that exist between the division of tasks in domestic labour of women workers and their functions in the world of work. The study draws on in-depth qualitative research in a telemarketing company. The aim of this study of telemarketing operators was to obtain a deeper understanding of how these workers experience the dimensions of their work in terms of the sexual division of labour in both production and reproduction. The term 'productive work' is not used in the strict Marxist sense of work that directly creates surplus value but in a more generic sense, to designate the salaried act of working, whether in productive or unproductive work, as it is performed in capitalist society. The expression 'reproductive space' refers to the domestic sphere..

Resisting Call Centre Work: The Aliant Strike and Convergent Unionism in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Countering the more placid depictions of call-centre work on offer from academic literature, this paper illuminates the labour antagonisms currently being produced within this growing form of employment. It brings into sharper focus one of the ways in which call centre workers are organising to protect their interests, by describing their participation in the emerging model of 'convergent' trade unionism of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) and their 2004 strike against the Canadian telecommunications company Aliant. The five-month strike was provoked by a set of processes that characterised the transformation of the Canadian telecommunications sector in the 1990s, including the privatisation of public telephone companies, corporate convergence, and the restructuring of the labour process at the telecommunications companies that emerged. Drawing on the descriptions offered by a group of call-centre workers who are members of Local 506 of the CEP, the paper focuses on the transformation of the Aliant customer contact labour process from its 'help-desk' functions towards conditions prevailing within non-unionised outsourced call centres across New Brunswick, and recounts the 2004 strike. It concludes by assessing the significance of these events for unionised call-centre workers in the Canadian telecommunications sector and reflecting on how convergent unionism might be extended to include non-unionised workers at outsourced call centres across the region.

Standardising public service: the experiences of call-centre workers in the Canadian federal government

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the impact of the adoption of neoliberal economic policies and practices on public sector jobs within the Canadian Federal government. In recent years, employment in the public sector has been increasingly shifted to a call-centre format, thereby transforming the working conditions of public servants as well as access to services enjoyed by Canadians. By adopting work practices, technologies and managerial techniques usually found within the private sector, we argue that the call-centre format fundamentally transforms the notion of public 'service' from secure employment and a dynamic career to that of a routine, Taylorised job. In this process, standardised interactions redefine the notion of public service and the role of the public servant.

In spite of everything: Professionalism as mass customised bureaucratic production in a Danish government call centre

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of the consequences of the transformation of part of the Danish Tax and Customs Administration (TAX) from a traditional white-collar public administration into a call centre. TAX participated in the study using 'Amica' testing methods aimed at improving the psychosocial working environment in call centres. The results showed a surprising and rapid development from a situation where employees reported a stressful and unsatisfying work environment to one where the organisation had taken a giant stride towards improving the work environment, involving a major shift in leadership and employee identity. The paper discusses this change from a traditional white-collar model to a 'mass customised bureaucratic' production one in a New Public Management setting that focuses on cost reduction, customer orientation, performance monitoring and documentation

Attracting customers through practising gender in call-centre work

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate and analyse various ways in which gender is used as a resource when call-centre firms and their employees create customer relationships. Drawing on interviews in a case study call centre it argues that men and women are understood to work differently from the point of view of attracting customers. Men are found important as individuals and through technology-related services, whereas women are conceived as resources through their association with certain products, not as individuals. Thus female gender as a resource is embedded in the commodified products..

Employment in call centres in Bulgaria

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, Bulgaria has become an important destination for call-centre outsourcing of client services from abroad. Thousands of new jobs in call centres have been created in the capital and the largest Bulgarian cities. This remarkable development has not yet been a subject of serious analysis. For this reason this article aims to present a summary of the development of the call-centre industry in Bulgaria, focusing on employment in the sector. In particular, the authors, focus on the characteristics of the workers who are sought, recruitment policies and training in call centres, working environments, remuneration practices and workplace representation of employees. The analysis makes it possible to draw some conclusions about the characteristics of employment in call centres in Bulgaria and how this compares with employment in the sector in other countries.