# The subterranean stream: Communicative capitalism and call centre labour

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**abstract**

This paper introduces an international inquiry into collective organization in call centres. Arguing that it offers an important test for labour recomposition in the twenty-first century, the article begins by situating the global explosion of call centre employment over the last two decades by adopting and extending political theorist Jodi Dean's concept of 'communicative capitalism'. Second, it surveys the dominant perspectives on the labour performed by call centre workers and introduces the autonomist concept of immaterial labour, one which encourages us to approach emergent forms of employment from the perspective of the struggles and the collective organization they produce. The paper continues with an overview of the forms of labour resistance emerging from call centres globally and concludes by offering a sketch of three of the the research project's case studies in Italy, Ireland and Canada.

## Introduction

'Workers should not be expected to be the eyes and ears of corporate capitalism while working on poverty wages with no job security in a call centre that often has its carpet infested by fleas', thus labour organiser Omar Hamed explained some of the conditions that triggered a 24-hour hunger strike by employees at the New Zealand market research firm Synovate in 2009. Their action was a part of the Calling for Change campaign, organized through the 11,000-member UNITE! Union and aimed at achieving better wages and working conditions at seven research companies in Auckland. Tele-researchers at these firms, many of them teenagers, have organized strikes and community pickets outside company headquarters in recent years as a response to inadequate breaks, job insecurity, and low pay compared to employees at their Australian parent companies, and they have won collective agreements and raises (New Zealand Press Association, 2009). As Hamed's words underscore, their daily production of information about the public is of profound importance in a digital market, but their labour is systematically devalued and exploited. The situation of employees at one of the targeted companies, SurveyTalk, illustrates the tech-saturated power relations unfolding within global call centres today: as the New Zealander employees carry out market research on behalf of Australian corporations such as the telecommunications firm Telstra, management demands they lie and tell Australian survey participants they are calling from Australia. Incidentally, this is where they are monitored via a video camera affixed to the call centre's wall.

This paper introduces an international research project into emergent forms of labour resistance and collective organization in call centres. While call centre work has been one of the fastest-growing sources of employment in the twenty-first century, it has not exactly lived up to the rosy portraits of rewarding 'knowledge work' that have been served up for almost fifty years now by economists, sociologists, futurists and management gurus. To begin with, working in a call centre tends to include a well-established mix of low wages, high stress, precarious employment, rigid management, draining emotional labour and pervasive electronic surveillance. They have been called digital sweatshops and compared to battery farms and Roman slave galleons. But the intent of the inquiries tying together this research project, however, is not to dwell on the ways in which employment in call centres tends toward exploitative and disciplinary relations. Rather, its goal is to offer a portrait of this emblematic form of informational labour in which language, culture and communication are put to work that begins with the resistance and collective organization produced within its ranks. Such an approach has implications that resonate well beyond the world of call centres. Call centres are a quintessential product of processes that have characterized the broader transformation of work in the information society, including the restructuring of large companies, a shift toward the provision of services, the growth of outsourcing, the intensification of communicative forms of work, and the imposition of flexible employment practices. As such, call centres are a vital testing ground for labour's ability to adapt and reorganize in a digital economy (Guard, Steedman and Garcia Orgales, 2007).

This paper situates the global explosion of call centres over the last two decades by adopting and extending political theorist Jodi Dean's concept of 'communicative capitalism' (2009). Second, it surveys the dominant research perspectives on the labour performed by call centre workers and proposes the autonomist Marxist concept of immaterial labour, one which encourages us to approach emergent forms of employment from the perspective of the struggles and the collective organization they produce. Third, it offers an overview of the forms of labour resistance emerging out of call centres globally, and concludes by offering a sketch of the research project's primary case studies in Italy, Ireland and Canada.

## Communicative capitalism and the call centre

Academic research on call centres has tended to neglect the broader political and economic processes that have shaped these new workspaces and propelled their remarkable growth (Ellis and Taylor, 2006). In a bid to limit such a tendency, this article adopts and extends Jodi Dean's concept of communicative capitalism in order to frame the call centre within the contemporary political-economic landscape. Dean's term names the way our economy has, over recent decades, incorporated and become increasingly dependent upon the 'proliferation, distribution, acceleration and intensification of communicative access and opportunity' (2009: 17). The tremendous investments in telecommunications infrastructure made throughout much of the world in recent decades have brought about a situation in which, as political economist Dan Schiller suggests, communicative scarcity has begun to recede (2007: 81). Fears during the 1990s over a growing digital divide between information 'haves' and 'have-nots' now appear to have been slightly off-track, as IT costs have dropped dramatically over

the last decade and the differential inclusion of populations as IT consumers - rather than their outright exclusion from the market - has become the norm in an economy that derives increasing value from communication, information and knowledge. Examples of such differential inclusion abound. In China, migrant workers keep in touch with their extended social networks by texting. Disposable cell phones are offered for sale at corner stores in otherwise devastated American cities. Cyber-cafes around the world offer refuge to gamers with insufficient download speeds at home. Connecting with others at a distance has never been quite as easy as it is today.

But Jodi Dean's concept is polemical, not celebratory. The profusion of communication in daily life has not eroded social inequalities as some media theorists hoped it would, as Hamed's words underscore, it has merely fuelled an informational economy that is the scene of new power asymmetries. Different sectors of industry reap major profits from our newfound communicative possibilities, from telecommunications to high-tech, from new media companies to electronics manufacturers to e-waste 'recyclers'. But communicative capitalism, Dean maintains, is especially formidable in the ideological domain. Offering us expanded possibility to express ourselves has become a central plank of neoliberalism's alluring communicative promise, one that both reinforces its legitimacy and buffers it from democratic social change. We can all have our say on whether Iraq should be invaded, but then it happens anyway. Never mind whether or not our messages ever reach their target, register, or provoke a response from those in power - what counts is the ability to send them. For Dean this emerging relationship between networked digital media and the global market has only led to the strengthening of neoliberalism, a reduction of meaningful political discourse, and a creeping marginalization of progressive social movements, who may know how to twitter in the infosphere but have forgotten how to organize in the real world. More communication has led to more inequality, not less.

Our political-economic system has become 'communicative' in other domains as well. Most strikingly, recent decades have witnessed the extension of 'communicative access and opportunity' (Dean, 2009: 17) to billions of consumers who are now engaged in regular and ongoing interactions with the corporations in their lives. Once famously characterized by rigidity and a lack of responsiveness in the post-War, Fordist economy, from the 1980s on firms increasingly encouraged the development of a permanent, intense and vital flow of informational exchange between themselves and their lifeblood, consumers. At the centre of this informational flow lies the call centre, a vital product of communicative capitalism that both reflects the political-economic formation and plays a key role in its daily reproduction. In everything from providing tech support for web hosting to gauging the effectiveness of advertising campaigns, call centres have become a vital means for mediating the relationship between the institutions and the subjects of communicative capitalism in what has been described as a 'paradigmatic shift in the reordering of the customer inter-face across the entire economy' (Bain et al., 2002: 184). If for some companies communicating with their customers remotely now delivers the lion's share of sales, for most there is an increasingly widespread expectation that consumers will be offered the opportunity to get or keep in touch, customize their deal, get help using the product, check the status of their account, report failures, offer feedback, threaten to break their contract, and so on. If this accommodation of the 'diversity, multiplicity, and the agency of consumers'

(Dean, 2009: 9) sounds utopian, it is worth remembering that this vortex of informational exchange, the ceaselessly-circulating 'data stream' (2009: 26) between communicative capitalism and its subjects must be organized and compressed so as to ensure it costs capital as little as possible. The birth of the call centre during the last decades of the twentieth century represents the dominant corporate response to this necessity, its rationalization of these functions, and its hidden abode of communicative production.

As part of what Ursula Huws (2009) calls the new 'interface' that has been installed between communicative capitalism and the rest of us, call centres therefore stand in for the promises of accessibility, responsiveness, and personalized attention that it would otherwise be much more expensive for institutions to make. The interface itself is of course renowned for being alienating and impersonal, frequently exasperating, and often designed to extract something from us while offering little or nothing in return – a first-rate example of how in the digital economy, as Dean puts it, communication 'produces its own negation' (2009: 26). But it is when one begins to examine the labour relations within the call centre that our era's real digital divide, the one separating employers and workers, becomes apparent. Indeed, the discussion of the relationship between the call centre and the broader political economy of communicative capitalism, like Dean's concept itself, risks losing sight of the fact that these customer relations factories are fuelled not by savvy entrepreneurs or Wall Street liquidity, but by a diverse, global and communicative workforce. Communicative capitalism could not exist were it not for communicative labour.

## Working in the call factory

For millions around the world the experience of the call centre is much more immediate than fielding the infamous consumer research calls around dinnertime or being routed to another country in order to figure out what might be wrong with the printer. It is their way of making a living as frontline workers in the digital economy. As a result of the steady meshing of call centres into the quotidian circuits of communicative capital, the growth of these workspaces over the last twenty years has been staggering, producing notable shifts in the composition of labour forces across many regions. If the factory once was symbolic of work within developed countries, call centres have taken their place alongside other occupations such as service sector work, retail employment and care giving as one of the most likely fields of employment for new generations of workers. By 1998 it was estimated that employment within them was expanding by 20 percent a year globally and that 100,000 jobs were being added every twelve months (Datamonitor, cited in Deery and Kinnie, 2004). Since then some 15,000 call centres have opened in Europe alone, fuelling the continent's fastest-growing form of employment (Burgess and Connell, 2006; Paul and Huws, 2002: 19). In Ireland and the Netherlands during the first decade of the twenty-first century one out of every three new jobs was a call centre position (Datamonitor, cited in Cugusi, 2005) and in America, the country that gave us the call centre, over 3.5 million people, almost 3 percent of the working population, are said to toil in one (Head, 2003). Nor is such employment growth restricted to the developed world, as the call centre workforce has grown rapidly in India, the Philippines, Barbados, China, Malaysia, South Africa and

other countries. Afghanistan, one of the most war-ravaged places on earth, has an emergent call centre sector supporting the growing market for mobile phones in that country: 'Taliban call in and the women talk to them', says Zermina, a manager at one of Kabul's call centres, illustrating how the industry has been translated into stunningly diverse settings, producing novel workforce compositions everywhere it goes (cited in Doucet, 2007).

Two main intellectual traditions have competed to explain the condition and experience of call centre work. The first emerges from business, management and occupational psychology, and drawing on Daniel Bell's (1999) post-industrial narrative of declining class conflict has presented a rather hopeful portrait of call centre employment as a form of what management guru Peter Drucker (1999) called 'knowledge work'. These researchers have stressed how call centre work can be a rewarding job, marked by autonomy, relatively high levels of employee satisfaction, and a workforce that identifies with management's objectives (Frenkel et al., 1999). Marxist labour process theorists have begged to differ with such cheery portraits. The intellectual roots of these researchers are to be found in the work of Harry Braverman, who in Labour and Monopoly Capital (1999) examined how new forms of control and exploitation were being devised for those performing what he called 'mental labour'. Written as a response to the industrial sociology of his day and the 'apologetic purposes' it pursued in its celebratory discussion of labour (1999: 241), Braverman took aim at Bell and others by cataloguing the ways management was routinizing, deskilling and dehumanizing the clerical worker's labour process. Almost forty years after his landmark text, the labour process perspective Braverman gave life to has produced a broad set of studies into the ways that force and consent are combined in the exploitation of call centre workers' communicative abilities (Callaghan and Thompson, 2001; Taylor and Bain, 1999). Labour process scholars have seen call centre work not as a humane departure from, but instead as the latest update of the Taylorist separation of conception and execution – for these workers, post-industrial society has become not Daniel Bell's dream, but Harry Braverman's nightmare.

By the early twenty-first century, however, it began to be acknowledged that critical approaches to the call centre labour process, in their eagerness to rebut fables of knowledge work in the call centre, had paid much more attention to how workers are organized by management rather than looking for the moments when they organize for themselves. If knowledge worker theories were disingenuous in their portraits of happy call-centre workers in friction-free informational workplaces, labour process critiques had largely served up the dispiriting image of a subjugated workforce in return. Seeking to remedy this problem, this research project draws from a tradition of inquiry forged over the last half century by successive generations of theorists and militants from Italy. Autonomist Marxist analysis is a heterogeneous tradition which has become prominent in the Anglophone world since the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's Empire in 2000, but has since its earliest days in post-War Italy mingled with a variety of radical currents, including American labour sociology, French post-structuralism and Regulation School political economy, radical feminism, and critical communication scholarship, becoming an increasingly transnational perspective with an associated and evolving set of political tendencies. Like labour process theorists, autonomists see relations between labour and capital as ineluctably conflictual, but they begin their

analysis of this relation with labour's resistance and search for autonomy, a force which their hypothesis suggests anticipates and provokes capitalist restructuring. Within this broader outlook, since the mid-1990s many autonomists have proposed the term 'immaterial labour' to name what Hardt and Negri define as 'labour that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication' (2000: 290). Immaterial labour describes a growing variety of forms of work in the media and communication industries and beyond: it is performed by freelancers at Viacom, by sessional lecturers at your local university, and 'permatemp' software designers at Microsoft. Not only does such labour put language, culture and communication to work with unprecedented intensity, it is usually affective and expressed through now-ubiquitous information technology. So autonomists agree with knowledge worker theorists that work has changed as capitalism has gone digital, but they also point out that the extraction of value from these professions, much like that which occurred in the car factories of Detroit during the heyday of Fordism, is by no means a friction-free matter. If videogame workers sabotage, film workers agitate and call center workers organize, the concept of immaterial labour asks us to look for these moments of conflict, to launch our inquiries into those instances when the communicative worker becomes resistant and unmanageable, to explore what Negri (2005) and others refer to as the 'self-valourization' of labour.

Inspired by this tradition, the research project introduced in these pages seeks to examine call centre work from the perspective of the resistance and collective organization it produces. And while this ultimately requires moving beyond Braverman, the spirit of such a project is captured by a striking passage from his work, which gives its title to this paper. Labour and Monopoly Capital is commonly accused of offering a sobering portrait of capital's subjugation of labour, but no analysis of how and when the latter responds. In an uncharacteristic moment, however, Braverman likens labour resistance to a 'subterranean stream', which he says will emerge 'when the conditions permit, or when the capitalist drive for a greater intensity of labour oversteps the bounds of physical or mental capacity' (1999: 104). Organized resistance, Braverman warns, is endemic to workers under capitalism. Their insubordination, he says, 'renews itself in new generations, expresses itself in the unbounded cynicism and revulsion which large numbers of workers feel about their work, and comes to the fore repeatedly as a social issue demanding a solution' (1999: 104). If management is constantly compelled to reorganize and intensify the labour process so as to better exploit the communicative powers of its workforce, Braverman warned, the latter would generate its own varieties of organization.

With these words in mind, this research project accompanies Braverman's prediction into the call centre through the worker inquiry, an autonomist method that traces its roots back to Karl Marx (Panzieri, 1965). And there is much to research, for along with the spectacular growth of call centres, an inevitable efflorescence of labour resistance in both traditional and unfamiliar forms has followed. The last section of this paper offers an overview of such resistance, moving from widespread individual acts of refusal to highly organized collective behaviours. Within them, it argues, lie the seeds of a twenty-first century unionism for the digital economy.

## The subterranean stream: Labour resistance in the call centre

A very different picture emerges of call centre labour when it is seen through the prism of conflict. Consider one of its defining features, the unusually high rates of employee turnover, or 'churn' as it is sometimes called. According a recent global study (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe, 2007: 40), call centres tend to lose a fifth of their employees on average every year, but in some countries, and particularly in the outsourced sector where labour conditions are harsher, the figure is much higher. In Irish outsourced call centres the turnover rate is 35 percent per year, and in the United States it is 36 percent. In India official figures are of 30-40 percent, but the real rate has been estimated at 65 to 75 percent, and exceeding 100 percent at some companies (Bain and Taylor, 2008: 39). This feature of call centre employment could perhaps be seen as a sign of the freedom customer service agents enjoy as mobile knowledge-economy players, perpetually moving on to even better professional opportunities in the sector. Yet as Kiran Mirchandani found in her research with call centre workers in India, despite having gone through a very long series of tests to gain such employment, they were 'unanimously unconvinced by the arguments about the quality of call centre jobs' (2004: 368). In other words, the spectacular turnover is not due to the fact that there is always an even better job down the street, but to the insufferable labour conditions marking the customer relations factories. If it is not a freelancer's paradise, the prevalence of churn might then be taken as a sign of the utter subordination of call centre labour, of which the disposability of the workforce is seen as a symptom. Yet this conclusion overlooks the fact that the flight from a job is one of the most basic and common forms of resistance to exploitative labour conditions.

'Undercurrents of distrust', Kate Mulholland's (2004: 720) exploration of informal resistance by employees at an Irish call centre, offers a very different view of the 8 percent monthly turnover she found there. Quitting one's job at the call centre, she explains, was only one part of a 'widespread pattern of work rejection' among workers. One employee Mulholland cites probably summed up the sentiments of countless thousands passing through the revolving doors of call centres around the world: 'it was a struggle for me to get to the end of the week, I got very stressed and would crash out. Just being away from the place was great, then you walk in on Monday and it starts all over again. I couldn't cope with this see-saw life and left' (Ibid.). This ongoing exit from the digital assembly lines does not point to some paradoxical love of its difficult labour conditions therefore, but rather to what Taylor and Bain have described as 'a deep undercurrent of distrust of management's motives' (2003: 1497) flowing beneath its organizational surface. This undercurrent carries a range of informal strategies along with it through which employees 'collude, collaborate and cooperate' (Mulholland, 2004: 710) in order to resist the worst parts of their profession. One widely reported example of this behaviour are the ingenious techniques developed in order to slow down the pace of work, ranging from elementary forms of hacking call centre technology to twenty-first century strains of industrial sabotage. In a classic example of such hacking from Australia, van den Broek, Barnes and Townsend (2008) describe team members pressing the 'transfer' button a split second before customers hung up the phone at the end of the call, a trick which gave them two or three extra minutes before the next call while it appeared to supervisors that they were still in conversation. Customer service representatives can also learn to recognize the signs of when

management is spying on them in order to elude its panoptic ambitions. At the call centre Mulholland (2004: 719) examined, things had gotten so bad that a culture had developed among workers where activities such as cheating, work avoidance, and phoning in sick were all seen as reasonable responses to a bad job. Such informal acts, aimed as they are at reclaiming stretches of time from the punishing rhythms of the call centre, certainly have 'an adverse and immediate impact on profitability' (2004: 713) as Mulholland and others have pointed out, but they can also become the basis for more organized forms of resistance.

Teaming up. Academic research has only begun to skim the surface of the ways in which call centre workers are creating informal, horizontal bonds in order to resist management's ceaseless productivity push from above, but the research thus far has offered some compelling glimpses of this process. Taylor and Bain's inquiry at Excell describes how collective humour, including the public ridiculing of authoritarian team leaders and managers, fed a 'vigorous counterculture' that eventually forced the reversal of a colleague's dismissal and a 99.4 percent yes-vote for union recognition across the company's three call centres (2003: 1502). Their research provides an example of how management's quest for technological control and work intensification begets precisely the worker cynicism and revulsion evoked by Braverman. Within this general malaise there are some signs that workers are repurposing the 'teams' they are frequently organized into toward wholly different ends: van den Broek, Barnes, and Townsend found that Australian workers 'teamed up' not to increase productivity, but to challenge managerial directives and improve their labour conditions (2008: 257). In one memorable example, the researchers recount how a team of 13 customer service reps signed a petition registering their opposition to excessive monitoring and 'relentless conditions of work', transforming the 'team' structure conceived of to intensify their workload into an informal vehicle through which to strike back against work intensification. Management's facile adoption of the discourse of workplace democracy clearly carries the risk workers might begin to take it seriously. In this instance the manager urged them to recast their complaints individually, and (in an irony not missed by the researchers) despite the impressive degree of cooperation they had displayed, the workers received low marks in the 'teamwork' category of their performance appraisal (2008: 264).

Embryonic unionism. If telling the boss exactly what you think, or quitting, or finding small ways to mitigate the relentless pace of work can all be rewarding in the short run, these activities do little to challenge management's structural power in the call centre. Beyond leaving or loafing, call centre workers are also engaged in a range of relationships with established trade union structures, whether through already-existing unions or organizing drives to form new ones. Scholars have often suggested that unionism is 'embryonic' (Russell, 2008: 206) in the call centre, but they have just as frequently pointed to the dearth of academic study of union organizing. A very rough picture of trade unionism in the call centre is nonetheless beginning to emerge, and it presents features that might surprise those who imagine it to be a union-free zone. Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe's (2007) study found that close to half of the workplaces they examined were already covered by some form of collective representation (collective bargaining, works councils, or both), generally as the legacy of collective agreements characterizing the industries the call centres operated on behalf of. This is

the case at Canada Post for example, where call centre workers belong to (and took part in the recent strike organized by) the Public Service Alliance of Canada (Rynor, 2008). In North America, as one of this research project's case studies has examined, call centre workers employed by continental oligopolies such as Sprint, Verizon, Telus and others are part of 'convergent' unions such as the Communication Workers of America, the Telecommunication Workers Union, and the Communication, Energy and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) (Mosco and McKercher 2006; Brophy, 2009). In some countries (particularly ones with higher levels of collective representation), established unions have managed to incorporate outsourced call centres into industry-wide collective agreements as the Gewerkschaft der Privatangestellten union has done in Austria (Holst, 2008). The prevailing image of call centres as union-free environments may thus owe more to ideology than it does to reality, proposing management's fantasy as if it were an actually existing state of affairs.

When a union does not already protect workers they can always form one, and academic research has recently begun to examine the labour organizing taking place along the fault line between workers and management in the call centre. Not surprisingly, some of the best research produced in the area is a product of the growing overlap between labour activism and academic inquiry. Al Rainnie and Gail Drummond (2006) describe a labour organizer's experience leading a successful unionizing campaign at an Australian call centre in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne. In Canada, Julie Guard, Mercedes Steedman and Jorge Garcia Orgales (2007) have documented the United Steelworker's successful campaign in the mining town of Sudbury, Ontario. Andrew Stevens and David Lavin (2007) depict the bitter (although ultimately unsuccessful) struggle to organize a call centre in southern Ontario, and writer and journalist Andrew Bibby (2000) has catalogued some of the many organizing efforts at financial call centres in Australia, Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The formation of unions also appears to be pursuing employers to the locations where they had relocated precisely in order to escape collective organization and higher wages, be it to the outsourced sector domestically, or internationally. A promising example of the latter that has received some attention is the UNITES Professionals organization in India, formed under aegis of the international umbrella labour organization Union Network International (UNI) in 2005 and now acting as an organized presence in six cities with 6000 to 7000 members (Taylor and Bain, 2006). However 'embryonic' the unionism driving these examples, it can make real differences for workers as far as labour conditions and job security are concerned.

Strike. When conditions become intolerable, call centre workers across the world have taken part in work stoppages and other forms of direct action to address their working conditions. In Mexico 1700 call centre workers at Tecmarketing, which provides support for the telecommunications giant Telmex, struck in February of 2008 in order to achieve a 4.4 percent pay raise (Reuters News, 2008a). The following month in Finland some 1,200 Union of Salaried Employees call centre workers at telecom operator Elisa's subcontractor Teleperformance voted to strike over the fact that they were barred from the sectoral agreement for telecommunications workers (Reuters News, 2008b). In Durban, South Africa, Communication Workers Union (CWU) call centre workers at Telkom struck in August of 2009, achieving a 7.5 percent salary increase (Moodley, 2009). In 2008 city council call centre workers in Ipswich City, Australia

rallied and struck against a proposed 'shared services' model, which aimed to bring a privately listed Australian outsourcing company, UCMS, into the provision of public services (Gardiner, 2008). Privatization frequently carries the risk of outsourcing and for Australian companies looking to pay lower wages sending work across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand has been a tempting move. As we saw in the introduction, however, that country has turned out to be a hotspot for call centre unrest. In September of 2008 employees of the transnational company Teletech took to the streets of Palmerston North to protest the outsourcing of their Yellow Pages inquiry assistance jobs to the Philippines (Duff, 2008). The job action has occasionally also been spontaneous in its flare-ups, such as in 2009 when United Services Union call centre workers at New South Wales electricity retailers wildcatted after the state government failed to guarantee their jobs in its decision to privatize the utility (Daily Telegraph, 2009). Customer service reps employed at the Italian call centre Omnia have been engaged in an ongoing series of actions against the company in recent years, including strikes, demonstrations outside its Turin headquarters, and (in one of the more recent tactics to emerge from European labour struggles) the kidnapping of the company's managing director in Milan, who was forced to reply to workers' questions regarding late wages and the use of temporary contracts (ANSA, 2009).

It is impossible to offer an exhaustive overview of call centre labour resistance here, but it would be remiss not to finish with a more specific mention of the organizing that has occurred around the outsourcing of work, a permanent source of managerial discipline and thus a central labour issue in call centres around the world. A perfect example of how strife arises comes from Thames Water in the United Kingdom, a privatized utility providing water to people in London that is owned by the Australian corporate banking and investment company Macquarie. In the fall of 2008 Thames announced it was raising water rates for 13.5 million customers by 3 percent above inflation for five years, allowing it to reap half-year profits of £23.2 million UK (Morning Star Online, 2009). But management at Thames told 282 unionized workers their jobs would be outsourced to India if they did not agree to 'family unfriendly' changes in working hours, provoking employees to ballot for a strike through the GMB union (Daily Mail, 2009). Situations like this are now commonplace. Workers at South African Airlines in the South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (Satawu) pursued similar action in 2008, threatening to strike over the airline's plan to outsource 250 call centre jobs to Dimension Data, an action that ultimately caused the company to back off (Modimoeng, 2008). Bain and Taylor (2008) have described the battles arising around outsourcing at five companies in the United Kingdom, concluding that strike action was the most likely to get companies to make concessions (including offering no compulsory redundancies) and that there was promise in the UNI's internationalist approach to call centre employment. Aiming to promote international cooperation and exchange between workers at risk of being outsourced and those in areas to which jobs are being shipped, UNI developed its Offshoring Charter in 2006 as one of the opening acts of a set of labour struggles that have clearly become transnational in scope.

Against this context, the research project introduced in this paper has followed three cases of collective organization by call centre workers in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In Ireland, an inquiry is being carried out with the O2 workers in Limerick, documenting their efforts to unionize through the Communication Workers

Union (CWU). The outsourcing of the company's technical department in 2006 inaugurated an ongoing low-level struggle between workers and management that has evolved against the backdrop of the Irish financial crisis. O2 offers a classic example of the transnationalization of the telecommunications industry, bought as it was from British Telecom by Spanish multinational Telefonica and now part of a wireless brand reaching from Eastern Europe to Latin America. Disciplinary management and the threat of outsourcing led workers to contact the CWU, which now has a permanent presence there and represents members in disciplinary hearings, but is still not officially recognized by the employer. Ireland is a hostile environment for union organizing and its thoroughly liberalized labour laws mean that even if the majority of workers at a company sign union cards the employer can refuse to bargain. At a July 2009 event in Dublin featuring an encounter between trade unionists and call centre workers, CWU organizer Ian McArdle (2009) spoke of a tipping point that had to be reached in any workplace in order to force the employer to bargain. At O2 progress has been slow as far as building the union, and members frequently operate covertly for fear of retaliation, but that tipping point appears to be getting closer. The most important achievement has been an end to the arbitrary punishments and firings that marked the call centre, something that occurred soon after workers balloted for industrial action as the first step toward a strike. As one union member summed up, 'they don't try and bully us into things now, because they know they can't…They know the union is in the door. They know the union is staying. They would be as well accepting it' (CWU member, 2009).

Across the Atlantic in the province of New Brunswick, Canada, where almost 5 percent of the labour force works in call centres, the research project has tracked the story of the Aliant call-centre workers who joined the CEP in 2001. Moncton employees of the telecommunications company (formed out of a merger of four privatized monopolists in 2000) described the restructuring of its customer contact division toward the rhythms of a call centre, a process that was soon followed by outsourcing to non-union contact centres down the road. Aiming to protect their employment and quality of work, call centre workers animated a four-month strike in 2004 for their first collective agreement. In a tactic that would feature prominently in the subsequent Telus strike on the west coast of Canada, Aliant employed private security guards to monitor and intimidate the striking workers. As one worker describes '[w]e did get harassed quite a bit by the security guards. Several tactics, fear tactics, were used and stuff like that. So it was kind of rough, you know, they showed us our home address on a piece of paper, just to rub it in that we know where you live. They delivered letters at my home about conduct and stuff, they were saying I was harassing people and all that which, you know, is kind of scary' (CEP Union member, 2006). Yet in the process workers won moderate pay raises and, more importantly, a protocol limiting the company's ability to outsource its in-house call centre work. Like the O2 workers, however, their status remains uncertain given the wider basin of non-unionized call centre labour in the region.

In Italy, an inquiry was carried out with the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, a self-organized collective of workers in Rome working at the largest call centre in Europe. Atesia represents the most extreme case of post-Fordist employment: over 4000 operators at the company were employed for years on a series of freelance, or what are called parasubordinate, contracts. For new Atesia workers answering calls outsourced from

Telecom Italia Mobile, employment meant having one's contract renewed once a month, then once every three months, and then every 12 months. As freelancers they technically rented their workstations and were paid by the call, but management set their shifts at six hours a day, six days a week. In essence it was masked permanent employment, only without benefits, the right to unionize or to strike, paid holidays, sick days, or maternity leave. Collettivo member Federica Ballarò recounted seeing women forced to work during their eighth month of pregnancy lest they lose their position, as well as new mothers leaving the workplace on breaks to breastfeed their babies (Ballarò, 2007). The Collettivo was formed in 2004 and began to organize with assistance from Cobas, the rank and file union. In a form of digital sabotage, operators began to hang up on customers at the two-minute and forty-second mark when they received the greatest compensation for their calls, and over the next two years the Collettivo organized ten strikes, deftly harnessing the flexibility imposed on them. As parasubordinate workers going on strike was illegal, yet as freelancers they technically had the right to come to work whenever they liked during their scheduled shift, or not at all. The Collettivo organised a coordinated claiming of this right, crippling the call centre for 24 hours. By 2007 an agreement was hammered out between the then centre-left government, the confederal unions, and Atesia in order to quell the unrest that was by that point sweeping the Italian call centre industry. The plan decreed the permanent hiring of parasubordinate workers, who were to be compensated for years of benefits and back pay due to their misclassification. But their organising cost them dearly, as at the moment every original member of the Collettivo at Atesia has been fired.

Call centres have not obliterated worker resistance, but their reputation as the digital sweatshops of an informational economy is clearly well deserved. Communicative capitalism is the scene of new forms of inequality, and the call centre is a privileged space for the exploration of how the former reproduces the latter. Yet Braverman's warning against assuming the 'acclimatization' of the worker to 'new modes of production' (Braverman, 1999) points toward the importance of exploring communicative capitalism from the perspective of the labour that fuels it, and exploring that labour by beginning with the conflict, resistance and collective organization it produces. As Michel Foucault once mused, 'in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts to dissociate those relations' (2000: 329). Following the twists and turns of contemporary labour resistance and collective organization allows us to focus upon a very different digital divide, the one separating employers and the increasingly affective, communicative and linguistic workforce they have come to depend on.

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