

Call Centre: what to do about precarious employment?

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Translated by Patrick Carmichael, October 2018

jW spoke with N., member of the Berlin Call Centre Offensive, which campaigns for the rights of precarious workers.

Q: You co-founded a call centre initiative. For what purpose?

We called ourselves Call Centre Offensive (CCO) - ironically based on the "Call Center Offensive NRW". This is a staff position with the Prime Minister of North Rhine-Westphalia, which promotes the establishment of call centres (CC). In terms of working conditions, this form of subsidy does not provide any conditions, and we are fighting it. We want to make employees in call centres make more demands about their working conditions. We concentrate on the precarious so-called call centre agents (CCA's), also because they predominate in such circumstances.

Especially for agents who want to finance their studies with this work, lousy working conditions are common. These people usually have no idea about minimum rights despite clearly being wage-earners.

Q: Are there any successes in your work?

We maintain a website and invite monthly to a public meeting of call centre agents in Berlin. A success of our work is that workers from the call centre "Audio Service" demanded contracts that met at least the legal minimum conditions. As a result, most were terminated. But at least they received severance pay of between DM 2,500 and 5,000, while earlier generations of workers at "AudioService" could always be kicked out without severance pay.

Another success is that a fairly large group of workers in the "Hotline" call centre have joined forces to form a works council initiative. When the personnel managers were told by IG Media (the Trades Union), they were threatened with layoffs and a wage cut by 30 percent. After a company meeting, where the majority of those present spoke in favour of a works council and was also accompanied by a rally before the operation, the management had invited some of the initiators to an interview. After that they were terminated and banned from the premises. During the day, another 23 people received their notice. Shortly thereafter, an appointment was made by the management to elect an election committee for the works council. At this meeting, employees still working there petitioned for the reinstatement of the terminated workers. Whether suits for reinstatement will be successful remains to be seen. But at least now it looks like there will soon be a works council there.

Q: What are the working conditions in call centres?

Very variable. Specifically, this can range from a dozen calls per shift to 400 calls in eight hours. There are companies in which more than 30DM hourly wages, collective bargaining, fitness classes in working hours and elected works council are common. And there are others where employees work contractually, without representation, on a commission basis, for less than twelve marks an hour without paid leave and without sick pay. The last described CCA's are our target group.

Q: Employees in precarious jobs are not considered as easy to organize. What are the reactions to your engagement?

In fact, most of the people we deal with have never had a thought to joining a union before. But often enough already a small push, so that people fight back.

Q: What is your relationship with the unions?

The aforementioned battle at AudioService has led to some new members of IG Media. We also send the CCA's for legal advice to the unions. Above all, we have contact with IG Media and the postal union, which have recently paid more attention to call centre conditions than before.