

## 14. CALL CENTRES IN PORTUGAL: THE TRANSITION TO TELEWORKING AND COMPETING FORMS OF TRADE UNIONISM

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Since the beginning of the 21st century, Portugal has become an attractive country in which to install call centres, resulting from its qualified, unemployed and low-paid workforce, suitable digital infrastructure and geographical location (Roque, 2018b; CGTP, 2020). The growing number of multinationals, national companies and outsourcers providing this service in Portugal is significant. Recent accounts reveal that the phenomenon spread from big to medium-sized and small cities across the country, attracted by lower municipal taxes, lower labour costs and local monopsonies. As the call-centre sector has grown, it has also become a battleground for collective representation, with long-standing trade unions seeing the emergence of other forms of worker organisation from alternative movements.

The case of call-centre workers placed in telework is a boundary situation in which key features associated with digital labour platforms became applied to changed working conditions. Call-centre workers form a mixed set regarding their employment status. While some hold a regular employment contract with the firm where they work, many are hired through temporary work agencies and often they are formally self-employed working for the firms without any kind of employment contract. Thus, many call-centre workers are subject to the neoliberal 'erosion of the standard working relationship' of which the rise of platform-mediated gig work is part and parcel (Stanford, 2017, pp. 391–392). Moreover, worker performance is under continuous electronic surveillance and assessment through the call-centre digital platforms. Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, call-centre workers from the non-essential services in Portugal moved from large on-site open-plan offices under direct supervision to working from home. These 'teleworkers' went on providing services through digital platforms

installed on their computers at home, without, however, having been formally placed under a teleworking regime with its associated rights.

According to articles 165 and 166 of the Labour Code (AR, 2009), teleworking is the provision of work carried out from home or elsewhere by written agreement between employer and employee, using information and communication technologies such as computers and the internet. The work platforms were coupled with standard communication platforms to implement remote labour supervision and management, in a context of growing pressure on workers' performance. Besides the usual platforms that these workers use to conduct their tasks, they were forced to use other platforms, such as Meets, Skype, Slack, and WhatsApp, to be monitored and surveilled while performing their tasks. In some cases, companies installed webcams without having obtained workers' permission. In theory, these workers were transitioned under the teleworking regime, but in practice most of them were not compensated for the extra home expenditure they incurred, or provided with the adequate equipment to perform their work. In this respect, the labour regime for some call-centre workers during the COVID-19 pandemic came to resemble that of digital platform workers to a large extent. This case illustrates both how some key features of the logic of digital labour platforms are pervasive across different labour contexts, and how features of the digital labour platform concept can depart from the idea of 'crowdwork' where 'crowds' of clients and providers are matched via a website platform.

## Method

The onset of the pandemic brought an opportunity to study this sector because call-centre workers needed a digital platform to work from their homes. However, the pandemic has also created significant difficulties for developing fieldwork. The sector was in turmoil, with most call-centre workers transitioning to the telework regime and others being dismissed immediately or going through a longer process of layoffs (Roque, 2020d).

The case study was carried out between May 2019 and January 2021. It included extensive online searches of literature and exploratory interviews developed in the previous phase of the *Crowdwork project* (Boavida and Moniz, 2019). From June 2020 to February 2021, we conducted seven more semi-structured interviews, of which one was with a digital platform worker from a translation services multinational, four were with trade unionists, and two were with

specialists in labour relations and call centres. We made several unsuccessful attempts to contact potential interviewees through email and telephone calls. During both phases, we made personal contacts in the field, especially since one of the authors is a trade unionist and worked in several call centres, which afforded us access to key informant workers and social actors in the field.

### **Workers' profiles and working conditions**

Call-centre workers are mostly young adults who may hold other skills or qualifications but rarely use them. Call-centre workers do not privately own the equipment and other assets required to do their job. Their precarious working condition, especially in terms of their contractual status, varies from being an independent worker using the so-called 'green receipts'<sup>1</sup> to being hired through a temporary work agency (Roque, 2010). In general, most interviewees stated that the remuneration is slightly above the national minimum wage (€665 per month in 2021), noting that remuneration includes bonuses according to the companies' reward policy. They also noted that competition and cooperation coexist among both workers and unions. Call-centre workers perceive themselves as members of a class and/or profession in need of legal protection and recognition. According to our interviewees, while there is a collective agreement that covers the call-centre sector and its companies, one main barrier is the lack of a professional category around which salary differentiation could be negotiated (Roque, 2019).

Most workers complain about the poor working conditions of the call-centre environment: precarious and flexible contracts; low wages; lack of ergonomic, safe and healthy working conditions; pervasive control and surveillance; frenetic pace of work; and the shortness of breaks (Paul and Huws, 2002; Roque 2010, 2019). Working conditions are worsened by the type of technology used to communicate. For example, pressure, stress and work intensity increase significantly when a video call is used, rather than a phone call or online chat system, and they are reduced if email is used instead. As one former call-centre worker mentioned in the interview, 'the worst is the billing, technical support and then the sale of the product'. Some interviewees reported that workers would like to

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1. 'Green receipts' refers to the documents that self-employed workers are required to use for declaring to the tax authorities the amount they have received for a provision of services or the sale of a product. By extension, the term became the nickname for the tax regime for self-employed workers.

be acknowledged as high-risk professionals, not only due to the exhausting pace of work but also their lack of protection during the pandemic. Working in large numbers in open-plant call-centre offices presented a clear risk to their health and ultimately their life during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, telework from home was not always a guaranteed option from the beginning, and some employers even used the denial of telework as a threat.

High levels of staff turnover – a significant characteristic of the service industry – are particularly acute in call centres. Call-centre workers are often subcontracted through temporary-work agencies that offer them short-term and flexible contracts, allowing for easy dismissal or seasonal replacement with others more profitable to the companies, thereby hindering unionisation (Roque, 2010, 2017, 2018b). As a result, the call-centre workers' struggle demands the eradication of temporary-work agencies and their full integration as employees in service-providing companies, to achieve coverage by collective bargaining, access to a wider range of labour and social rights, and better working conditions (CGTP, 2020).

At a societal level, there are also significant problems related to precarity, social security contributions for temporary workers, arbitrary dismissals and retaliation against unions. Enforcing the legislation would require stricter labour inspection, particularly among small new companies that do not comply with minimum labour standards. Given the relative size and importance of the sector in the Portuguese economy, regulation could also improve recognition for the profession, especially through it being acknowledged in the National Classification of Professions.

### **Struggling for representation: The main actors**

Our fieldwork revealed a sector characterised by high turnover, division of workers, lack of bargaining power, low levels of unionisation, and one far from having cooperative industrial relations. Call-centre workers appear to be more submissive and less engaged in trade unionism than the traditional industrial workforce; they are in a professional activity that they perceive as temporary but which becomes permanent with the passing of time, despite high staff turnover (Roque, 2010, 2018a). High staff turnover poses a significant obstacle to organisation, as even though workers build networks, these rapidly fall apart when their members drop out (Roque, 2010, 2018b).

Nevertheless, the call-centre sector has been one main battleground for collective representation during the last decade in Portugal, especially since the creation of the Call-Centre Workers Trade Union (STCC, Sindicato dos Trabalhadores de Call Centre), which differentiated itself from traditional trade unionism (Roque, 2008, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020b). STCC resulted from new social protest movements that emerged in Portuguese society during the financial crisis (2007–2008) and the economic crisis (2007–2013) and in its aftermath. In recent years, STCC has been experimenting with ‘new forms of anti-bureaucratic and anti-capitalistic trade unionism, council communist, and autonomist worker representation’ (Roque, 2018b, p. 95), organised from the shop floor as opposed to the vertical, political and bureaucratic arrangements that regular unions present (Roque, 2018b, 2020b). Some members believe that these forms of collective organisation are characteristic of the birth of a new independent unionist movement, under the strong influence of the main existing labour structures, significant levels of job insecurity and poor labour conditions.

Except for this sector-specific independent union – which is not affiliated to any confederation and frequently promotes recruitment actions, protests and strikes, albeit with less effective victories – the most prevalent organisational strategies for collective representation are still carried out through traditional mainstream unions. Nevertheless, it is also noticeable that STCC has influenced mainstream trade unionism into more aggressive and combative action in terms of street demonstrations and other approaches such as cyberactivism (Huws, 2003; Antunes, 2015; Dyer-Whiteford, 2015; Roque, 2018b).

Apart from STCC, there are five other trade unions active in this sector, all of which are affiliated with the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers (CGTP, Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses): the National Union of Telecommunications and Audiovisual Workers (SINTTAV, Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores das Telecomunicações e Audio-visual), the Union of Electric Industries in the South and Islands (SIESI, Sindicato das Indústrias Elétricas do Sul e Ilhas), the Trade Union of Workers, Offices and Services in Portugal (CESP, Sindicato dos Trabalhadores do Comércio, Escritórios e Serviços de Portugal), the Unions of Workers in Manufacturing, Energy and Environmental Activities in the Centre North (CITE-CN, Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias Transformadoras, Energia e Actividades do Ambiente do Centro Norte) and in the Centre South and the Autonomous Regions (CITE-CSRA, Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias Transformadoras, Energia e Actividades do Ambiente do Centro Sul e Regiões Autónomas), and the National Union

of Postal and Telecommunications Workers (SNTCT, Sindicato Nacional dos Trabalhadores dos Correios e Telecomunicações).

According to two interviewed trade unionists from STCC and SINTTAV, these are the two most representative unions, even though SIESI and CESP have also been responsible for several industrial actions. The same trade unionists considered that membership is complex to assert and is divided by regions of influence. There is also an association – Precários Inflexíveis (Inflexible Precarious) – dedicated to advocating for those who are experiencing precarity, false temporary contracts and bogus self-employment. Throughout the years, this social movement has been deeply connected with the call-centre workers' struggle, especially in 2013 in the wake of a mass layoff of nurses from the Saúde 24 national healthcare call-centre service (Roque, 2017). However, their capacity to represent collectives is very limited, and they have been dependent on the influence of one or two minority parties to make their collective voice heard by decision-makers.

### **Recent trends in industrial action and union strategies**

In recent years, labour relations in the call-centre sector have been in permanent turmoil, especially since 2019. During that year, SIESI promoted a strike in support of higher salaries, holiday increases and the direct hiring of outsourced workers without the intermediation of temporary work agencies. According to SIESI, 90% of the Randstad call-centre workers joined this strike. Their workers in corporate call centres also had a national strike day in late October 2019. SINTTAV went on strike on 22 and 31 December 2019 because temporary work and outsourcing companies in the sector would not cooperate with the unions (Público, 2019; O Minho, 2019).

The number of trade union strikes in the call-centre sector has been growing during the COVID-19 pandemic, brought about partly by worsening work conditions due to the pandemic itself (Table 14).

**Table 14** Strikes in the call-centre sector during the COVID-19 pandemic in Portugal

Union calling strike	Date or period of strike	Reasons for strike
STCC	24 March 2020	Transition to telework regime of call centres providing non-essential services
SNTCT	28 March 2020	Pay rise, working conditions
STCC	28–30 December 2020	Pay rise, meal subsidies, precarity, working pauses
SIESI	24, 25 and 31 December 2020, 1 January 2021	Pay rise, working conditions, non-discrimination
SITE-CN	24, 25 and 31 December 2020, 1 January 2021, 16 February 2021	Precarity, pay rise, work-life balance
STCC	24, 25 and 31 December 2020, 1 January 2021	Subsidy for telework costs, pay rise
SNTCT	24, 25 and 31 December 2020, 1 January 2021	Working time, pay rise, working conditions, precarity and hiring through temporary work agencies
SIESI	All weekends in 2021	Working time, pay rise, pauses, against temporary work agency Randstad

Source: Interview data (2021).

In 2020, STCC went on strike twice for the right to telework during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further reasons for the conflict include the demand for integration of workers within the permanent staff of the companies for which they provide permanent services, so that they would be covered by collective bargaining, have more rights and enjoy better working conditions (CGTP, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant challenge for these workers in terms of finding good and effective collective representation. During the pandemic, the public seemed to realise that many tasks and services were done through call centres, which changed the public perception regarding call-centre working conditions. According to STCC's leader:

The pandemic never stopped the call-centre sector. We noticed that COVID-19 changed clients. They now have more patience, are less aggressive towards the operators and understand that their problems are with the company.

A critical turn occurred when a strike called by STCC shed light on the behaviour of many companies in this sector:

Our strike in late March 2020 called attention to the fact that most call centres refused to allow their workers to move into telework and were forcing their workers to continue working together.

Call-centre workers were also on strike during the period of Christmas and New Year 2020, after the major strike they had led during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (Roque, 2020a). In calling for a telework strike on these specific days and during the pandemic, STCC had several aims, including direct hiring, the end of false temporary work and improved social recognition for the call-centre worker profession. According to STCC's leader:

Our strikes during Christmas and New Year intended to demand the same regulations for telework that exist in the labour code, demanding the creation of a profession with regulations, dignity for our work (as some of us still feel ashamed due to the sector's lower status and poor working conditions) and demanding a subsidy for telework. We also want to say to the parliament that we are still waiting for the study on our working conditions in call centres, which was approved last year.

During the first wave of COVID-19, the call centre Teleperformance forced all of its close to 10,500 operators to work during weekends as if they were normal working days and regardless of whether or not they had been off work during weekdays – the call centre enforced this by threatening to remove the possibility of transitioning to a telework regime (CGTP, 2020). STCC's leader reported that some companies created unsafe and precarious working conditions, for example, allowing workers who had tested positive for COVID-19 to enter the workplace without informing the whole community of workers (Roque, 2020d). Still according to the STCC's leader:

We feel now that social perceptions about our work have changed, and [public] debate is now more aware of the brutal conditions under which call centres operate and the control that managers exert over their workers.

Building on this, in March 2020, STCC called for strikes against in-person work during the pandemic, which resulted in further mobilisation (Roque, 2020c). The leader of STCC stated:

Workers are starting to believe that it is worth doing something because now they can see something happening. Most people didn't want to go back to the offices

under COVID-19, and we won that right by mobilising workers. Many multinationals in Portugal did not engage in telework in their branches in eastern Asia.

Nevertheless, the success of this strike led by STCC, as well as SINTTAV's strategies for dealing with digital challenges, did not solve all the problems raised during the process of collective action. There continues to be permanent pressure from the managers towards these teleworkers, as STCC's leader mentioned:

We still face many cases of abuse and tighter managerial controls for those in telework. Teleworkers are still being called by controllers because there are faults in the internet service or the system is too slow. We even have cases of three controllers sending WhatsApp messages [to teleworkers] at the same time.

The relentless conflict continues, even though most workers have tended to avoid confrontation during the COVID-19 pandemic. In some cases, trade union management failed in their strategy. According to STCC's leader:

To avoid confrontation, many workers paid for an increase in their internet service and even bought computers out of their own pockets. The labour code states that companies should supply the hardware and software to teleworkers. Some companies tried to remove the meal subsidy but have since withdrawn that demand. Abuse and pressure are brutal. Trade union organisers now prefer not to take the time to do union work to avoid confrontation. There were cases where companies did not inform their workers that colleagues had contracted COVID-19. Furthermore, we received reports that managers are warning that those who do not meet targets will have to go to work in person in the office. To avoid this, workers are working longer hours to meet these targets.

According to the trade unionist of SINTTAV interviewed, the union was also concerned with the transition to telework because companies had drafted regulations with the consent of the works councils alone, without consulting with trade unions. Supervision was intensified in the context of telework, with some call-centre managers prone to using social media and messaging applications (especially Skype and WhatsApp) to control workers in a more pervasive way. Due to the increase in the number of calls, the so-called 'five-minute tolerance' was lowered to one minute. That is, if workers did not answer a call within one minute, they would receive a communication from their supervisor asking them

what was happening, often in an aggressive manner. However, the 10 minutes stipulated for a bathroom break remained in place.

STCC accused most companies in the sector of maximising exploitation and increasing profits by taking advantage of teleworking to transfer operating costs (electricity, water, internet) to call-centre workers who were working from home (Lusa, 2020). Along similar lines, transportation and meal subsidies also came under discussion, with companies proposing their removal. Furthermore, according to a trade unionist and SINTTAV shop stewardess, during the pandemic there were several digital strategies utilising WhatsApp and Facebook to deal with telework which placed workers under additional pressure. In some companies, each team created a WhatsApp group to not only exchange information but also exert public pressure on workers. For example, when a worker was late for work, the supervisor would announce it to the entire WhatsApp group and the minutes of delay would be discounted from that worker's monthly salary. However, this proved a double-edged tool, as the WhatsApp and Facebook interfaces also allowed all workers to have access to the same information simultaneously, increasing transparency and impartiality, as well as affording unions and their delegates a means to present their work to the call-centre workers.

At the same time, there were also other more informal WhatsApp groups which primarily served social and conversational purposes, although some of these groups also shared information about work in the company. These groups could have up to 12 or 15 members and were based on the trust established between colleagues. In one of these WhatsApp groups, the interviewed trade unionist from SINTTAV gave support and transmitted information regarding workers' rights. She also had a WhatsApp group specifically for six trusted colleagues – all of whom were unionised and two were very class-conscious.

There were more communication groups across different digital media with different trust levels. During the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the management of one call-centre company created a WhatsApp group – including union members, the works council, supervisors and production directors – among whom no trust relationships existed, leading to distrust regarding the information shared in the group. In terms of different media, a SINTTAV leader in northern Portugal asked one trade union delegate in the company to create a Facebook group to inform union members in the company, but workers did not feel safe participating and did not trust the page. As many call-centre workers in teleworking do not live in Porto, SINTTAV also engaged in their first plenary

session online. STCC is already engaging in cyberactivism since 2014, adopting online and social media strategies and holding virtual plenaries before the pandemic (Roque, 2020c).

## **Concluding remarks**

This case study has identified a vast repertoire of union strategies, including rank-and-file activities, media protests, the use of digital media to counter divisions between workers, and strategies to avoid management control of communications, despite intense managerial opposition. Nevertheless, the large number of competing trade unions present in the call-centre sector may hinder the ability of workers to obtain concessions in terms of income and working conditions. The strategic repertoire of the independent union STCC allowed for swift reactions, as they know how to use digital tools, social media and the mainstream media in their conflicts. Other unions were slower, as it took time for older generations of unionists to understand and adopt the systematic use of digital repertoires; these older generations struggle to understand the needs of such collectives of 'digital precarious' workers with a growing sense of their socio-economic class.

Furthermore, it is not difficult to see that even strong trade unions such as STCC will face difficulties with the transition to teleworking, as traditional trade union methods of industrial action may cease to be effective with the wide use of telework. Trade unions will be forced to improve their digital repertoire to reach more atomized workers and, eventually, competition will increase for new workers. Also, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we detected an increase in new contracts for self-employed workers who were required to own their means of production, such as a computer, internet connection and smartphone. Owning their means of production probably will further increase the difficulty to recruit and organize new workers arriving in a sector with so many unions. Thus, we would recommend legislative action to define the profession of call-centre operators within the Portuguese Classification of Professions, thereby allowing the establishment of collective agreements in the sector as well as more cooperative industrial relations.