

## Social and health vulnerabilities in Portuguese call centers in COVID-19 pandemic times

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More than ever, the characteristics of late modernity are being demarcated (Bauman, 2008). In COVID-19 pandemic times, exacerbating social vulnerabilities and inequalities, individualism, poor welfare state intervention and flexible and insecure working conditions, as well as the increase in natural disasters, have led to a risk post-modern society which endangers the extinction of human life itself (Beck, 2000).

The informative digital machinery has been spreading worldwide since the end of the 20th century (Antunes, 2018) affecting call center workers in Portugal who have been struggling with safety and hygiene issues, occupational diseases, and accidents, thus constituting one of the “chronic” problems of post-industrial societies. In 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, Portuguese call center operators felt threatened for their lives in their workplaces. In early March, when the first cases started to appear, call center companies did not take any action concerning health and safety measures. Healthy workers were placed in the same open space room with sick ones, and those who had recently returned from abroad, especially from countries where the pandemic was widespread, were not subjected to any quarantine or isolation procedures. Given this situation, and due the fact that call center buildings tend to be located in cities with greater incidences of the virus, it is no surprise that, during the pandemic, these workplaces became hotspots for contagion. According to STCC, in their vast majority, call center workers were forced to continue to dislocate themselves to their working places during the pandemic.

In terms of architecture, call centers can comprise numerous forms, ranging from garages, shops, and buildings, where work is carried out in open space. Call center workers

can experience high levels of precarious working conditions lacking safety and hygiene. Unfortunately, in the wider scenario, there are no infrastructures for older workers, nor for those who suffer from reduced mobility. Cleaning can also be casual, and be performed during working hours; the air conditioning systems are not properly replaced, adjusted, or cleaned, leading to respiratory and pulmonary diseases; windows are usually closed, and lighting is often artificial and/or insufficient; tables must only contain a sealed water bottle, a ballpoint pen and a notepad; workers also often face excessive noise due to the high number of operators working in the same room (Roque, 2018). Each service station is separated by screens and devoid of any privacy. Every week a map is designed with random allocated places to each operator to ensure that there is no talk during work, or that any trace of familiarity is established between workers. Workstations and tools, including computers, mice, headphones, screens, and keyboards are daily shared and are devoid of proper cleaning, enabling the transmission of viruses, skin diseases, and allergies (Ibid., 2018).

According to an interview conducted with the Call Centre Workers Trade Union President (STCC), Danilo Moreira, he stated that the cleaning materials were very scarce, such as disinfection products, detergents, alcohol gel, and toilet paper. In fact, the cleaning staff was forced to use only water in a Portuguese northern call center. It should be noted that these companies frequently try to omit health hazards, as well as COVID-19 infection cases. Workers who had recently returned from abroad, especially from countries where the pandemic was most widespread, were not subject to any quarantine or isolation procedures.

On March 11, 2020, workers from a Telecommunications' call center in Coimbra, at the center of Portugal, organized between themselves with the help from STCC and held a strike with public manifestations demanding the transition to teleworking, as well as health and safety measures. On March 12, 2020, STCC issued a statement, with the support of other trade unions and various activists, proposing a set of measures to help solving the COVID-19 call center crisis, aiming at stopping all non-essential sectors with the full payment of wages and the guarantee of rights in defence of public health, i.e., not putting at risk the health of millions for profit issues. Nevertheless, this request was ignored and the major call center companies remained operative, without taking any prophylactic measures, nor social distancing. In particular, all these situations were denounced by workers to trade unions, especially to STCC, which reported it to the national and international media, such as Reuters, to the different parliamentary groups and asked the Health Ministry (DGS) and the Authority for Working Conditions (ACT) to carry out health inspections.

In addition, STCC called for a nationwide strike through the internet, taking place between March 24 and April 5, 2020. They also created a model in several languages for the denunciation of bad practices during the COVID-19 period, as well as an online petition – Public Calamity: Absence of working conditions for call centers and shared services centers stressed by COVID-19 – so that workers of non-essential public services could immediately be transitioned to teleworking, without any loss of remuneration. This situation also led to a state of widespread revolt in call centers at a national level with absences from work, sick leave, and vacation requests. Other workers, even went to work but refused to login, stopped answering calls and other services, and demanded an immediate transition to teleworking. As a result, the majority of call centers informed their workers that they would proceed immediately with the transition to teleworking.

Given the fact that call center work comprises all the possibilities of transition to teleworking, and since the state of emergency had been decreed, this situation should have been operationalized immediately. The role played by STCC was crucial, reinforcing and accelerating this process. According to Danilo Moreira, the results of this strike were quite positive for the majority of workers. In fact, this could become a turning point in hygiene and safety matters for the call center universe if DGS and ACT continue to carry out regular inspections, not only in situations of national calamity. However, days after the strike ended, there were still companies that had not fully transitioned their workers to teleworking, alleging that they lacked VPN's. Unfortunately, others engaged in bullying practices, moral harassment, and threats to dismiss workers even after they had transitioned to teleworking.

Nevertheless, issues regarding the expenses inherent to the worker related with furniture (chairs and tables), internet installation and its costs, electricity costs, and the payment of meal allowance, as well as "Orwellian" impositions demanded by some companies, such as the installation of a webcam at the worker's house for control purposes. In other situations, companies opted for layoff strategies, or sending dismissal letters to operators who were in training or in teleworking.

Now, that the emergency state has ceased, several call center companies are planning to start calling their workers back to work in June and July, 2020. STCC has asked the government and the Republic Assembly to legislate in order to prolong teleworking for call center services until September, before taking any decisions or giving in to the pressure from the multinationals that run the sector. Nevertheless, according to Danilo Moreira, the majority of workers want to keep themselves in safety doing teleworking. Call centers can involve dozens of workers in the same room, using the same bathrooms, elevators, and canteens without respecting social distancing, heightening the danger of contagion. Even the wearing of masks while answering calls can be very complicated, or almost impossible, especially for people who

suffer from respiratory problems during an 8 hour shift.

In a neo-liberal scenario, labour exploitation constitutes itself a true pandemic affecting all professional sectors, threatening not only human life, through poor working conditions regarding safety and hygiene at work, but also through the threat of imminent dismissal, placing workers in situations of vulnerability. Amidst all this scenario of labor exploitation, the call center operator is not even recognized by the Portuguese National Classification of Professions. In this sense, the majority of workers, treated as collaborators, do not recognize themselves as a part of the working class, remaining socially unprotected in work, and in unemployment, for the sector does not have specific labor regulation.

As Santos (2020) points out, the precarious worker has to choose from dying from a virus or dying from starvation, i.e., the worker chooses to stay at home and loses part of his remuneration, or even his own job, or chooses to expose himself to the danger of contamination for survival

purposes. Could this be the new labour pandemic that will plague the digital economy, in a world increasingly susceptible to health crises, and to the destruction of nature and the function of worker?

## References

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