

# Table of Contents

Call to Arms . . . . . 1



# Call to Arms

By Mute Editor

In the summer of 1999 Kolinko, a group of German radicals, decided to start working in call centres, examining exploitation there and strategies for overcoming it. Three years later they published *Hotlines*, an invaluable document for those wanting to understand how work is carried out and resisted in call centres. The group have been criticised by some for promoting workers' enquiry as a political project and engaging in 'radical sociology'. Here, Kolinko reprise and defend the thinking behind their research, and one member gives a first hand account of his time working at one of the largest call centres in the UK

## A RADICAL ENQUIRY

The *Hotlines* book describes a three year process of enquiry in call centres, attempting to understand the situation there, workers' behaviour during and against work, conflicts, and interventions – through leaflets and otherwise. In this enquiry, we saw ourselves as workers participating in the struggles and trying to support their development. We had a guiding principle: make clear to other workers, and ourselves, the actions that are already being carried out. Our goal was not to enlighten 'unreflective' workers, but to push beyond our own limited horizons.

We want to grasp the standpoint of the collective social worker: the effects of technological change, the impact of the social and international division of labour on everyday life, the experiences of other workers in their struggles, and the power they develop through them. It's about breaking up the limited perspective which the isolating capitalist organisation of work imposes on us, blocking our own view of things.

Of course, our attempts to get an overview, to understand class conflicts, and to throw our ideas into discussion – in other words, the ways and means we use for enquiries – ask for a continuous debate. We used the *Hotlines* questionnaire mainly for reflecting our ideas and for starting discussions with other workers. Consequently there was much they missed; it did not say much about struggles in other sectors, about crisis, and nothing about war. Better leaflets would draw the lines between the events on the shop floor or in the job centres and the global transformations of capitalism – a means to further encourage discussion among workers by supplying information on other struggles. In the worst case, they won't read that stuff or know what to do with it; in the best case they will use it during upcoming conflicts and start to spread their own experiences through leaflets or other media.

We do not believe in the supposed separation between workers and militants/activists, one lot with their crazy revolutionary ideas, the other only interested in more money and job security. While there may be thousands of examples of the 'individual worker' – individualism and competition while searching for a job, demands in collective bargaining situations, racism against newly emigrated workers – there are also many examples of the opposite: the doctor's receptionist who does not want to work in medical practices any more even if she gets paid better, because she prefers being together with larger numbers of workers in a call centre; the casual worker who doesn't give a shit about money and security and goes surfing after four months of work. Historically there are many examples of workers who act against their economic interests – enjoying themselves by burning down their company, killing the boss and so on.

Enquiry is one method that can be used in order to understand this space between workers' behaviour as labour power that wants to improve its conditions, and as the class that wants to put an end to exploitation. It can do this by dealing with real processes, contradictions, and tensions. Workers already make enquiries: they are interested in the wages of their foremen, conflicts in other

departments, the restructuring management has planned (sometimes even in the struggles of the landless in Brazil or the unemployed in Argentina); if they don't make such enquiries, they lose out, unprepared for the next conflict. In most cases the division between those who are interested in what's going on and those who are not is not a division between so-called 'revolutionaries' and workers, but between workers themselves.

For us the issue of our exploitation corresponds directly with that of our struggle. We don't have to tell anyone that we/they are exploited: it's a collective effort to understand the social dimension and structure of how this exploitation is organised. We have no desire to be militants or activists, sacrificing ourselves for a historic mission, getting on everyone's nerves including our own. Rather we make this choice: to deal with the situation collectively, rather than individually, whenever we have to sell our labour power or cope with the worsened conditions at job centres and the welfare office. For instance, we can decide together in which places of exploitation we want to earn our cash and at the same time participate collectively in conflicts. That way, our disgust for the capitalist daily routine and our anger against the conditions and those who oppress and exploit us can flow together into one common political project.

Enquiry is the condition, form and method of our attempts to understand the current struggle and to take part in it. Those who would still like to go into these questions in more detail from the perspective of our experiences should read the Hotlines book.

## **LONDON CALLING**

I had heard a lot about call centres, day after day, for two years. I thought I knew what to expect.

### **The Company**

One of the biggest market research companies in the world. They have offices or call centres in 36 countries, big multinational or government clients. For example the Australian General Union asked the company to conduct a survey about flexible work-time. They should just have asked the company's workers – they knew all about it already.

### **The Call Centre**

The call centre is in London, near London Bridge, in a side street facing a high red brick wall with barbed wire on top. A group of young Spanish and Italians stand in front of it, the Italians swearing about Berlusconi, the Spanish smoking weed. Two doors, one pincode, then you are inside the 'postmodern chicken farm' as people call it. Packed little phone booths for hundreds of interviewers. The job is market research, phoning people in France, Italy, Spain, Germany, the UK, Ireland, randomly selected by the computer. At the end of each row, the supervisors' desks.

### **The Conditions**

The whole thing started with two days' unpaid training, basic brainwashing about market research, how to use the antique computer program and so on. The second day a really nice guy from French Reunion Island came in ten minutes late and was sent home again, unpaid, but at least only half brainwashed. The stylish gay Asian supervisor, who regularly handed out anti-globalisation information and was a very welcome guest at various call-centre-workers' parties, was able to justify giving him the sack.

After these two days you can start working – if you get your shifts. You have to book them a week in advance and if there is no work, you won't get any. The management wanted to introduce a new shift scheme, with a top list of interviewers: whoever completes the most interviews, whoever has got the least 'idle time' and is the most punctual and obedient worker can choose their shifts first. If you are a miserable worker, you'll get what's left over. Theoretically you can book as many shifts as you want – of course there are some legal restrictions, but they don't really count. I saw people working 12 hours

a day, seven days a week, although that's a sad exception.

### **The Work**

If you press 'y' after the computer asks you 'another interview?', it starts dialling random numbers. When you are lucky, you get connected to a fax machine or a modem and you can press '8', just to be asked the same question again. In between '8' and 'y' is the kingdom of idle time, but watch it – the king or queen of idle time gets into trouble. If you are connected to another human being you have to start asking questions.

Most sensible people hang up after hearing the word 'market research'; all the others usually are very lonely, mentally unstable or just wrong in thinking they're doing you a favour. We do surveys about alcoholic drinks, fast food chains, mobile phone networks, DVD-players and digital cameras, cars, petrol stations, post offices and more. We do it every day, 'til nine in the evening.

Imagine phoning a small Irish village on a Sunday night asking about DVD players. At least you can hide behind your script. You are supposed to read it from the screen, word for word. How else could you possibly think of questions like 'Imagine Burger King is a person with its own personality. Would Burger King be introverted, bold, immature or warm-hearted'? The average interview takes about 20 minutes, on average you do three to four interviews in a four hours shift, the fruit of 200-300 phone calls. Rumour has it that the company gets £70 for each interview.

### **The Workers**

From all over the world, in their 20s, most of them 'creative' in one way or the other. It would be wrong to say that they are 'students', though most of them have been. You can talk about Guy Debord with a French female artist just back from Cuba, the drummer of an anarchist Italian hardcore band, a gay second generation Turkish boy from Cologne who is studying fashion design, a traditional Asian Muslim man from the East End, a girl from a village in the Alps with a population of fifty, who just arrived in London – all in a four-hour shift. I've never worked in a place before where people were so critical and verbally able to dismiss their work, even capitalism as such. But I have also hardly ever seen people accepting such mind-numbing work and patronising management behaviour. Because it's just a job for a while? Because they mainly did that kind of job after quitting school or university? Because of the week-to-week shift system? I still don't have a clue why.

### **The Supervision**

There is one supervisor for ten to twenty interviewers, monitoring the idle time, counting interviews and attempts, listening to what you say and how you say it. They come to your desk if you are not dialling for five minutes; they give you bad marks if you don't stick to the script. They walk around and tell you to put your book or newspaper back into your rucksack and to bring the coffee back to the coffee machine, because hot drinks are not allowed. For an extra pound an hour and the privilege of not having to be on the phone they wear themselves out.

### **The Sabotage**

It starts with small things. Little drawings or scribbles in each phone booth. A lot of 'Leave your brain at the entrance' stuff. Someone is constantly stuffing the toilets with toilet rolls, so the management put out these notices: 'Whoever is putting paper down the toilets, please stop it. It is unnecessary, unhygienic and causes inconvenience for everybody.' The next day people cross out the 'It', replacing it with 'Market Research', or the name of the most hated supervisor.

We started collective slam poetry, handing on poem lines from neighbour to neighbour. Sometimes we used the computer as well, pressing the right combination of codes to keep the computer dialling, assuming that there are only fax machines at the other end. But that's risky: the supervisor could be monitoring you. Sometimes, especially with lonely elderly people, we live out our social worker

tendencies, talking about gardening and the new priest in the community, instead of fast food chains. Some Spanish guys developed a funny threesome, using the headset, passing the receiver on to the neighbour, so that the confused respondent talked to two interviewers. We faked management instructions that are placed in every phone booth, calling for the return of the Idle-Time King and mass orgies.

On Saturday shifts there is a higher drug consumption. That's when most of the weird stuff happens. Receivers at the supervisors' desks glued to the phones, people pretending to be preachers or radio show presenters. But there was never a real collective action. Once on a Saturday, 15 minutes before the end of a nine-hour shift, the supervisors circling to make sure we keep on dialling, some French girls suddenly started to cheer and applaud like crazy. All the pent-up energy broke loose and the whole call centre joined in, then packed their stuff and left five minutes early. We were never able to repeat that.

### **The End**

In the end, after six months, I got my fair share of disciplinary meetings, but wanted to leave anyway. It was my first and last call centre job. I found interesting people there, situations of solidarity and flirtation, a real friend. In political terms I am less sure. Maybe the most radical thing would have been to elect a shop steward or get rid of the zero-hour contracts and arbitrary management behaviour. But what for? To tie people even closer to this madness, by offering proper contracts? By that measure it would have become clear that we are workers with rights and our own interests. But why channel energy into such formally correct work relations, when there is all this disgust towards this kind of work, all this pent up creative anger?

What I missed here was a group of more experienced people, politically and job-wise, with whom to reflect on the situation. At first I thought a leaflet, for example about the new shift system, would be kind of 'external', so I just talked to my neighbours, made little drawings, like everyone did. But maybe something on paper, demanding a collective action and handed out to everyone would have forced all of us to define a position. Who knows..?

[http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e\\_lebuk.htm](http://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_lebuk.htm)