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Social work, trade unionism and the protection of vulnerable workers in the telecommunications sector.

Social work, trade unionism and the protection of vulnerable workers in the telecommunications sector

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Summary

This article analyzes the interface between social work, trade unionism, and the protection of vulnerable workers in the telecommunications sector, with an emphasis on call center and telemarketing operators subjected to intensive and precarious forms of work organization. It is a qualitative, descriptive-analytical study, anchored in a review of national and international literature on productive restructuring, outsourcing, worker health, and union action in services, articulated with the systematization of professional experience in the social work of a telecommunications workers' union between 2017 and 2024. Engaging with critical authors on the world of work and with empirical studies on telemarketing, it argues that the sector combines high diffusion of information technologies, strong pressure for targets, electronic surveillance, and intensification of work, generating significant impacts on physical and mental health, job security, and access to labor and social security rights. In this context, the role of social work in unions constitutes strategic mediation in identifying rights violations, referring cases to public policies, and building collective responses to new forms of labor exploitation. It is concluded that, although limited by regressive labor reforms and the fragmentation of the working class, unions that incorporate social work into their structure expand their capacity to protect vulnerable segments, especially in production chains marked by outsourcing and high turnover.

Keywords: social work; trade unionism; telecommunications; precarious work; worker's health.

Abstract

This article examines the interface between social work, trade unionism and the protection of vulnerable workers in the telecommunications sector, with a particular focus on call-centre and telemarketing operators exposed to intensive and precarious forms of work organisation. It is a qualitative, descriptive-analytical study based on a review of Brazilian and international literature on productive restructuring, outsourcing, occupational health and trade union action in service industries, combined with the systematization of professional practice in the social work department of a telecommunications workers' union between 2017 and 2024. Drawing on critical labor studies and empirical research on call-center work, the article argues that the sector combines intensive use of information technologies with performance targets, electronic monitoring and work intensification, producing significant impacts on workers' physical and mental health, job stability and access to labor and social-security rights. In this context, social work within trade unions constitutes strategic mediation, identifying rights violations, linking workers to public policies and supporting collective responses to new forms of labor exploitation. The article concludes that, despite the constraints imposed by regressive labor reforms and the fragmentation of the working class, unions that incorporate social work into their structures enhance their capacity to protect vulnerable segments, particularly in highly outsourced and high-turnover value chains.

Keywords: social work; trade unionism; telecommunications; precarious work; occupational health.

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, the telecommunications sector has become one of the laboratories privileged parties in the productive restructuring in Brazil and the world, combining privatizations,



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unbundling, outsourcing of activities, and intensive diffusion of information technologies and communication. The expansion of call centers and call centers, initially associated with mass adoption of fixed and mobile telephony and, more recently, financial services and commerce. electronics and technical support has produced a significant number of workers, both male and female. subjected to fragmented work schedules, intense pressure for productivity, and sophisticated mechanisms of control and surveillance. International studies estimate that work in call centers has reached... representing 1.5% to 3% of the workforce in some core countries, constituting a segment significant employment in services.

In Brazil, research in the sociology of work, worker health, and ergonomics indicates that the organization of work in these environments tends to reproduce a marked "digital Taylorism" through rigid scripts, constant monitoring, and service targets based on time and quality, Restricted breaks and high turnover, with direct repercussions on physical and mental health. of operators, both male and female. The literature records high prevalences of anxiety symptoms, stress, depression, work-related musculoskeletal disorders (WRMDs), and vocal problems. articulating ergonomic, organizational, and psychosocial risks.

In this scenario, trade unionism in telecommunications faces specific challenges. fragmentation of the workforce between "cutting-edge" technology companies and large service providers. Telemarketing services, often outsourced and sub-contracted, hinder the construction of Collective identities and trade union organization strategies. At the same time, labor reforms. Laws of a liberalizing nature, such as Law No. 13.467/2017, have broadened the scope for individual negotiation. They made working hours more flexible and favored the proliferation of weaker contracts, weakening the capacity for collective regulation of labor.

It is within this context that the reflection proposed in this article is situated. Starting from experience accumulated in the social service of a telecommunications workers' union, in articulation Using critical literature on labor, trade unionism, and social protection, this study seeks to analyze how... The presence of social workers in trade union organizations can contribute to the defense of rights. vulnerable workers in complex supply chains, particularly in the call center segment. centers. The central hypothesis is that social work, by combining individual and family care, Critical reading of structural determinants and networking with public policies expands the repertoire of union responses to forms of exploitation that go beyond the scope strictly labor-related, and encompass dimensions of health, social protection, and the reproduction of life.

From a methodological point of view, the article combines a review of national literature and international systematization of professional experience, from the perspective advocated by authors from the Brazilian social work perspective that understands systematization as the production of knowledge. starting from practice, without renouncing theoretical-critical mediation (Iamamoto, 2008). The review covers



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studies on productive restructuring and precarious employment in the telecommunications sector, research empirical studies on telehealth and healthcare, analyses of unionism in the service sector, and documents on international organizations on call center work and psychosocial risks. The systematization is based on technical records, management reports and field diaries produced between 2017 and 2024 within the social service department of a state-level telecommunications workers' union, preserving the anonymity of workers, companies, and specific situations.

The text is organized into five sections. After this introduction, the second section discusses the... Productive restructuring and the precariousness of work in the telecommunications sector, focusing on telemarketing. The third analyzes the recent transformations of unionism in the sector and its Challenges in protecting vulnerable workers. The fourth part delves deeper into the discussion of mediations. specific aspects of social work within the union, taking recurring cases and situations as examples. starting point for theoretical and political reflection. The fifth, finally, presents final considerations and Indications for research agendas and professional action.

2. Theoretical and political foundations: the right to sport, vulnerability, and comprehensive protection.

2.1 Productive restructuring and precarious work in telecommunications

The privatization of the Telebrás system in 1998 constitutes a decisive milestone in the configuration contemporary aspects of the Brazilian telecommunications sector. The opening to national private capital and Foreign market access was accompanied by regulatory changes, the introduction of universalization goals, and... quality, and strong encouragement of competition, which stimulated mergers, acquisitions and Large-scale organizational restructurings. In addition to the reorganization of companies of In the area of infrastructure and telephone services, there has been an accelerated movement towards outsourcing. activities considered ancillary or "non-strategic," such as network installation and maintenance, Billing, customer service, and technical support.

In the customer service segment, the establishment of large companies specializing in call centers... centers – many of them working simultaneously for different contractors – gave rise to a production chain in which the formal employment relationship does not always coincide with the actual place of work. Work command. The call center operator who speaks on behalf of a large operator of telephone companies, financial institutions, or digital platforms, most of the time, have their contracts... The work was contracted with a third-party service provider, whose profit margins depend on compression. of labor costs and strict adherence to agreed-upon performance indicators service contracts.

Comparative studies conducted within the scope of the Global Call Center Industry Project show that, in several countries, the growth of call centers has been accompanied by the adoption of models of Management driven by goals and productivity metrics, in which the average service time, the



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number of calls per hour, first-contact resolution rate, and "quality" indicators

as defined by employers become central parameters for evaluating and controlling workers.

(Holman et al., 2007). Such models intensify the Taylorist rationalization of service work,

now mediated by digital technologies that allow monitoring, in real time, of the use of voice, of

Body and time of operators.

In the Brazilian context, authors such as Venco (2011) and Pena (2011) highlight the hybrid character.

this process, which combines elements of Fordism – repetitive tasks, fragmentation and

Extreme standardization – with flexible forms of workforce management, such as contracts.

Temporary work, part-time hours, time banks, and high turnover. The notion of "Taylorism."

"Cybernetic" seeks precisely to capture this convergence between computerized control, goals

aggressive and intensive exploitation of the physical and mental energy of the workers.

From a legal and regulatory standpoint, the inclusion of Annex II to Regulatory Standard No.

NR-17, enacted in 2007, represented state recognition of the specificities of work in

telemarketing/call center, establishing minimum parameters for breaks, furniture,

Organization of work schedules and environmental conditions. However, reports from inspections and research...

Qualitative studies with workers indicate that compliance with these standards is often partial.

or nonexistent, especially in smaller outsourced companies or in contracts under strong pressure.

competitive. There are situations where regulatory breaks are compressed, workstations

They remain inadequate and goals become incompatible with respect for health.

Precarious employment in the sector is thus manifested in multiple dimensions: high turnover

and contractual instability; low wages relative to the intensity and complexity of the work;

Exposure to ergonomic and psychosocial risks; workplace harassment resulting from management practices.

based on "management by fear" and exacerbated competition between teams; difficulty in

recognition of a causal link between illness and work, particularly in cases of suffering.

psychological; and fragmentation of professional identity in a context of widespread outsourcing.

Recent research points to worrying prevalence rates of mental distress, burnout, and substance use.

Psychotropic drug use among operators reinforces the need for approaches that address the health of...

worker, labor regulation and social protection.

In this context, the role of workers' organizations – unions, federations, central organizations –

It becomes central to contesting the direction of labor regulation in telecommunications, confronting

Regressive effects of easing restrictions and building protection strategies for specific segments.

particularly vulnerable within the category.



3. Project Scenarios: Followers of Good and Health and Well-being

Trade unionism in the telecommunications sector in Brazil has a history marked by struggles in surrounding the state-owned company, defending acquired rights and resisting mass layoffs. promoted in the context of privatizations. In the post-privatization period, however, the profile of The category and the base of union representation have been profoundly transformed. Alongside workers Qualified in information technology, engineering and management, a growing contingent of young people, predominantly women, black people, and residents of urban peripheries, hired by companies outsourced call center companies, with low wages, more unstable employment contracts, and less tradition of collective organization.

This heterogeneity deepens challenges already present in Brazilian trade unionism: decline of union density, dispersion of affiliations, pressure for immediate results in the face of a scenario of Unemployment and informality, and disputes over projects within the organizations themselves. Studies on Trade unionism in the service sector points to the expansion of flexible forms of work – part-time, Temporary, outsourced work tends to weaken classic organizational mechanisms at the workplace. work, such as internal committees and union delegates, and hindering the building of solidarity. long-lasting.

In the telemarketing segment, the fragmentation of the production chain raises questions. Additional workers who perform essential functions for the reproduction of the business. Large contracting companies do not always recognize themselves as belonging to the same category; Unions, in turn, need to compete for representation in a context of companies that... They multiply, change their corporate name, and reorganize contracts relatively quickly. Furthermore, the high... High turnover – often encouraged by the management model itself – makes it difficult to train... militant cadres and the consolidation of permanent spaces for dialogue in the workplace.

Recent labor reforms – especially Law No. 13.467/2017 – have reinforced trends. individualization of labor relations, expanding the space for direct negotiations between employer and employee, making rules on working hours more flexible and allowing agreements to prevail. This addresses legislation on several points. In practice, this reduces the normative power of conventions. collective actions, especially in contexts where the balance of power is unfavorable to workers. At the same time, the expansion of outsourcing to core activities, recognized in decisions judicial and regulatory measures contribute to weakening the direct link with the companies that actually operate. They manage the work process.

Despite these obstacles, research on union actions in call centers shows that Unions have been seeking innovative strategies to reach dispersed workers: campaigns in social media, specialized legal and psychosocial support, on-site assistance at company entrances, Negotiation of specific clauses in collective bargaining agreements for telemarketing, training in



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worker health, creation of internal accident prevention committees (CIPAs) suitable for

The reality of call centers and participation in intersectoral forums on psychosocial risks. In some

In these cases, trade unions take a leading role in reporting non-compliance with NR-17 and

in public civil actions involving health risks, workplace harassment, and abusive targets.

At the international level, organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) has been warning about the risks.

psychosocial factors associated with work organization models based on high demand, low

control, electronic surveillance and contractual instability are recurring characteristics.

in call centers. These organizations emphasize the importance of worker participation and

unions play a role in assessing and managing these risks, as well as in the collective bargaining of measures.

prevention and protection.

It is at this intersection between productive restructuring, precarious work, and reinvention of action...

trade unions that reposition the functions of social services within representative entities,

especially in sectors marked by high socioeconomic vulnerability, such as

telephone customer service.

4. Methodological approach

The inclusion of social services in labor unions is not a historical novelty in

Brazil, but it takes on particular characteristics in the contemporary context. In entities of

In the telecommunications sector, the presence of social workers has been justified, above all, by the need for

to articulate the defense of labor rights with broader issues of social protection, health,

Social security and welfare, which are emerging strongly in the trajectories of precarious workers.

The systematized experience presented in this article refers to eight years of work in social services.

from a state union of telecommunications workers, in a scenario of strong presence of

Call center companies, outsourced and sub-outsourced. During this period, professional customer service

It focused on three major sets of demands, which are presented here not as

rigid categories, but with recurring core meanings.

The first core issue concerns physical and mental health. Workers, both male and female.

They often sought out the union in situations involving leave of absence due to INSS (Brazilian Social Security Institute) benefits, or upon returning to work.

with restrictions not respected, refusals to acknowledge causal link, and illness not yet diagnosed.

Documented. Reports of musculoskeletal pain, anxiety attacks, and panic attacks during the

Frequent symptoms included poor oral health, insomnia, and intensive use of psychotropic drugs. The role of social services was crucial.

It involved active listening, guidance on social security and labor rights, and coordination with...

The legal department provides referrals to health services – especially Reference Centers.

in Occupational Health (CEREST) and mental health services – and production of social reports



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that would make explicit the relationship between work organization and illness, contributing to processes administrative and judicial.

The second set of demands related to income, job security, and protection. social. In a context of high turnover and low wages, many workers depended social benefits, alimony, family income, and supplementary informal work. to balance the household budget. Situations of salary delays, improper suppression of bonuses and overtime, dismissals without payment of severance pay, denial of job security for Workers on leave due to illness or accident were common. Social services were involved in identifying these issues. of the repercussions of these violations on the social reproduction of families, engaging in dialogue with relevant bodies. Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) – such as Social Assistance Reference Centers (CRAS) and Specialized Reference Centers (CREAS) – for access to occasional benefits, Income transfer programs and special social protection services, when necessary.

The third core issue concerned violence, discrimination, and human rights violations in the environment. work-related incidents. Cases of workplace harassment by supervisors, humiliating demands for meeting targets that are not met. achievements, public display of productivity rankings, abusive restriction of bathroom breaks, denial of breaks stipulated in NR-17, discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation or Disability and retaliation against workers who participated in strike movements were part of expressive of the demand. In these cases, professional intervention combined support and guidance. regarding reporting mechanisms (internal, through the CIPAs, and external, via the Public Prosecutor's Office). Labor and Regional Labor Superintendencies), coordination with the union's legal department and, When applicable, preparation of technical documents to support collective actions.

These three areas of activity were developed in close coordination with other instances of union. Reading individual and family cases fueled the debate about agenda priorities. negotiation, highlighting, for example, the need for more protective clauses in relation to Breaks, goals, return to work after leave, and protection for women victims of violence. domestic. At the same time, social services participated in training activities at the grassroots level – discussion groups. Conversations, workshops, and informational materials – addressing topics such as mental health and work, social security rights, racism in the workplace, moral and sexual harassment, parenthood and Careful.

From a theoretical and methodological point of view, professional practice was based on a A critical perspective of social work, which understands the social question as an expression of contradictions of the capitalist mode of production and positions the profession in the defense of rights and in expanding the political participation of collective subjects (Iamamoto, 2008). In the context of the union, This meant avoiding reducing social services to a merely welfare-oriented logic or “management of poverty” and, conversely, strengthen the dimension of mediation between individual demands and



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collective action.

A recurring example was transforming isolated instances of workplace harassment into... Agenda for collective discussion. Similar cases, identified in different companies or units, They were systematized in periodic reports, presented at assemblies and collective bargaining negotiations. At times, the accumulation of complaints and technical documents supported the filing of lawsuits. Public civil actions regarding working conditions in call centers, involving unions and the Ministry. Public labor and inspection bodies.

At the same time, the performance of social services revealed important limitations. The capacity to The union's response depended on its financial sustainability and the balance of power with the companies. and the degree of organization at the base; the public health and assistance network, in turn, faced Chronic underfunding and long queues made it difficult for sick workers to access services quickly. to specialized services. In many cases, despite all the coordination efforts, workers They quickly returned to equally precarious employment at other call center companies. Revisiting the cycle of illness and violation of rights.

Nevertheless, the systematization of the experience suggests that the presence of social work in unions enhance the capacity to recognize and address situations of Vulnerabilities that extend beyond the strictly labor sphere. By articulating dimensions of health, In the context of social protection and human rights, social work broadens the scope of union action, bringing people closer to the profession. one of the demands placed by an increasingly fragmented service labor market, intensive and unregulated.

5. Final Considerations

The analysis carried out allows us to state that the telecommunications sector, especially in The call center and telemarketing segment constitutes one of the most emblematic spaces of Contemporary precarization of work. The combination of productive restructuring, outsourcing cascading spread of management models based on aggressive targets and electronic surveillance, and Liberalizing labor reforms create a scenario in which young workers, Mostly women and black people, they face intense work schedules, low wages, and illness. recurring and concrete difficulties in accessing rights.

In this context, trade unionism faces the challenge of reinventing its forms of organization. and intervention, shifting away from a model traditionally centered on large companies. Verticalized structures are shifting towards a reality of disaggregated production chains with multiple employers. and highly volatile employment relationships. Strategies that combine collective bargaining, legal action and Impact on public policy becomes indispensable, but, in isolation, it is not sufficient. to address the complexity of the situations experienced by call center workers.



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It is precisely at this point that social work, incorporated into the union structure, reveals its... power. By integrating individualized attention, critical reading of structural determinants, and action Working in conjunction with public health, social assistance, and social security policies, the social worker contributes to transforming fragmented demands into collective issues, fostering the development of agendas and Strategies for struggle that are more in tune with the reality of the grassroots. Active listening to workers. Those who are ill, victims of harassment, or in situations of severe income insecurity can be identified. patterns of rights violations, systematize information, and support collective actions in defense of decent working conditions.

This potential, however, is not without its limitations. The institutional weakening of trade unions, accentuated by legislative changes that affected its funding base and its role in regulation. Regarding labor relations, it restricts the resources available to expand technical staff and invest. in interdisciplinary care. The overload of demands, in the face of a context of unemployment and Widespread job insecurity challenges the ability of social services to combine emergency responses. with processes of political education and critical participation. The articulation with the public network of Social protection faces structural barriers imposed by the underfunding of social policies and through the targeting of programs, which often returns the responsibility to the union – and, consequently, to Social work – pressures that extend beyond their mandate.

Nevertheless, the experience analyzed points to possible paths. First, it highlights the importance of recognizing call center workers as central subjects of the category of telecommunications, and not as a periphery in relation to the areas considered "more prestigious" in the sector. This This implies including topics such as goals, breaks, ergonomics, and mental health in the negotiation agenda. Protection against harassment should be a fundamental issue, not just an isolated demand. Secondly, it reinforces the need to strengthen knowledge production based on practice. through systematization, applied research, and partnerships with universities, which can give to give visibility to contemporary forms of labor exploitation and to support strategies for confrontation. Thirdly, it points to the importance of linking local struggles to broader agendas. broad regulation of labor in services, engaging with national and international networks that They discuss psychosocial risks, digital platforms, outsourcing, and workers' rights in globalized chains.

From the perspective of the research agenda, relevant questions remain open: the effects medium- and long-term consequences of prolonged exposure to intensive telehealth models mental and professional trajectories; the intersectionalities of gender, race, and generation in the experience of precarious employment and union participation; the specificities of remote and hybrid work in labor unions. of customer service and its implications for collective organization; and the role of new technologies – such as Artificial intelligence and contact automation – in the reconfiguration of work and employment in the sector.

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In short, if social work is not, by itself, capable of reversing the structural precarization of work in telecommunications, the literature and experience systematized here indicate that your Union membership expands the possibilities for protecting vulnerable workers, by connecting them with labor unions. defense of rights, production of knowledge and construction of collective responses to new forms of exploitation. In a scenario of neoliberal offensive and fragmentation of the working class, this The articulation between theoretical critique, professional intervention, and union action appears as one of the paths. possible ways to dispute, in everyday life, the meanings of work and social protection.

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