



WE'RE CALLING FOR CHANGE!

"Smile and dial".... "keep on dialling"... "smile and dial"... "keep it going guys"...

OK, so working the phones can be pretty boring. We're expected to work hard, chasing high targets and for not much money. Many of us are on casual contracts, and are subject to petty rules and telling-off by supervisors.

Whether we're selling phones, doing surveys or answering service calls, there's now 750,000 of us call centre workers in the UK. Yet even though we represent such an important part of the economy, we don't have a lot of rights at work, and most of us aren't confident to stand up to our bosses.

But we believe that it is possible for call centre workers to get better conditions in the workplace. To do so, we have to stand together.

After all, a lot of the problems call centre workers face are the same, no matter what we're ringing about. As individuals it's difficult for us to ask for higher wages or more stable employment—but the bosses can't just get their way if we are organised to stand up to them together and to insist on our rights.

That's why a group of workers from different call centres in London have launched this bulletin.



sacked Carphone Warehouse caller Kulwinder Plaha was reinstated after a campaign by the CWU union

Although this bulletin is the property of no single trade union, we believe that collective organisation in trade unions is the best way for us to make progress on these demands and force a better deal from our bosses.

Its aim is to reflect our common demands (see right) and to share experiences of standing up for our rights at work.

A blog has also been set up at www.callcentreworker.wordpress.com to help us organise, exchange info about what different workplaces are like and tell others what work's going. From market research to sales or charity callers, we want to get everyone helping each other out.

Feel free to comment on the articles and post info: write in to londoncallcentres@gmail.com if you'd like to contribute (all content anonymous).

THE CALL CENTRE WORKERS' CHARTER

Across call centres, across unions, across Britain, we demand:

1. That every call centre worker receives at least £7.60 per hour

The Mayor's recommended London Living Wage is £7.60 per hour, but any call-centre worker in the country earning less than this will struggle.

Low pay blights the call centre industry—there are employers that avoid paying minimum wage and by taking on workers as self employed and paying commission only.

2. Jobs and Security

All call-centres to recruit directly. End the use of recruitment agencies.

All call-centre workers to be provided with contracts.

A guarantee that work will be shared equitably.

No job losses and no compulsory redundancies.

3. Management Style

Targets to be negotiated and agreed.

All call-centre employers to have an anti-bullying policy.

4. Training and Development

Three month probation periods to be completed. Full training and support to be provided for probationers.

Full training and support to be provided in cases of under-performance.

5. Health and Safety

Minimum Display Screen Equipment (DSE) standards to be adhered to.

Cleaning and catering services to be employed in-house.

6. Union Recognition

Call-Centre Employers to enter into recognition agreements with the relevant TUC-affiliated trades union.

CALLCENTREWORKER.WORDPRESS.COM

'THE SIMPLE LESSON: FIGHTING BACK WORKS'

James, a call centre worker for a bank in Atlantic Quay in Glasgow, has been part of building a union presence at the complex.

"Call centres are known for being target-driven and isolating workplaces. There is constant surveillance, performance tracking and pressure by the bosses."

He recalls the story of a recent dispute in his workplace, which started when his centre became over-run with calls after a system failure in the bank's bill payment system.

He said, "Management said that everyone was expected to 'chip-in' with some overtime and that taking breaks, 'would not help the team out'.

"So not only were we instructed that overtime paid at the basic rate was mandatory but that if we were true 'team players' we would sacrifice our only break for the sake of our colleagues."

The situation got to the stage where one worker was berated for having a "far too lengthy" toilet break.

"Many day staff were asked or told to stay on through the evening with some having completed 14-hour shifts," James continued.

In response union members had a meeting and drew up a list of demands. A majority voted to take some action against management.

Workers then put an ultimatum to management – demanding



Atlantic Quay looks flash from the outside, but it's not such a great place to work. However, organising is giving workers hope.

that they get paid double-time for any weekend overtime and time-and-a-half during the week, given the increase in the workload.

Otherwise they would start a work to rule and refuse to do any non-contracted hours.

Just two days later management capitulated and gave unlimited double-time and extended breaks, from 20 minutes to half an hour.

This victory wasn't a one off event and can give confidence to others in the same position.

James said, "From this we are putting out a regular newsheet called the Atlantic Worker. We ran one headline reading, 'Proposed Strike Wins Demands'.

"We hand out about 300 copies a month carrying the latest developments at the call centre, details of how to join the union and use-

ful contacts. In this month's edition we are advertising the Right to Work conference."

This is the sort of action and initiative that is needed in every workplace – building the union means you are ready for management attacks. The simple lesson is that fighting back works.



STANDING UP FOR OURSELVES

The following was a report from the CWU Organising Fringe Meeting at the union's recent conference.

"Call centre workers from across Britain came together at a meeting at last month's CWU conference.

The meeting was unlike most others at the conference, with many of the participants far younger than the average delegate, and most at firms that do not recognise the union. Nevertheless, the picture of how activists are recruiting included stories of great creativity in the face of bosses that are determined to keep call centres union-free zones.

"Four years ago the very mention of the word 'union' would have got you targeted by management," said Tracy, who works for a major mobile phone company in the west of England. "But today the atmosphere is very different. We walk around the building with our company ID badges on CWU ribbons around our necks.

"We really got up and running when we decided to set up a formal committee among the activists. From there we could plan our next move on recruitment, but we also started working out how we could represent people when they were facing disciplinaries.

"Now the company is forced to deal with the union, whether they like it or not. And believe me they don't."

Julie, who works at the same call centre, has recently become the young members' officer of her

union branch. She talked about the specific problems facing young workers.

"It can be really intimidating when you are trying to deal with a manager who is 30 years older than you," she said. "But the union provides a counter-weight.

"You know that you have people behind you, people you can get good advice from. That makes you feel strong enough to stand up for yourself and others."

Others in the session talked about the way the union is engaging with new media in order to get its message across. "I found out about the union from a friend on Facebook," said a young worker at a major telephone directory service in Wales. "From there I started getting hold of union material and handing it around at work.

"Now I'm known as the 'union man' and people are always coming to me with their problems. When they do, I tell them that we need a union and I ask them to join."

Graham, who works for a mobile phone company in the north of England, explained that half the challenge of building the union is being able to start small and deal with setbacks.

"A few of us decided the union should organise a social event," he said. "The first was not very good – only four people turned up. That could have left us feeling despondent, but it didn't.

"I said to the people who came, there might not be many here but we don't know the effect we've had on people just by trying to make the event happen."

Graham was right. Returning to work after the social he realised

that he had become a well-known figure around his office. Many of his colleagues started seeking his advice about workplace matters and asked for representation in meetings with management. From that point on the union started to grow.

Other activists in the session talked about how they'd used similar tactics, and as a result had engaged with lots of younger workers on political subjects.

Collection

One described how in her workplace charity collections were a regular occurrence. She had decided to do one too – using literature from the CWU's humanitarian aid. It was the first time a union-endorsed leaflet had ever been distributed at her office.

She told the meeting how taking a collection meant getting into lots of discussions with her colleagues about Third World debt, the threat to the environment and racism.

The process made the CWU seem relevant to many who are politically minded but did not instantly see the union as having something to offer them.

It also gave the union a "legitimate" means of getting a profile in a workplace where simply issuing union leaflets would have got you the sack.

Everyone who spoke in the session had faced management intimidation. Some had even been sacked and only returned to work after serious union campaigning.

But the determination of the activists shows two things very clearly – first, there are no "no-go zones" for the unions, and second, management intimidation may hold collective organisation back for a time, but it cannot do so indefinitely."

**CWU CAPITAL BRANCH CALL-CENTRE
WORKERS AND HACKNEY LMHR PRESENT...**



**Artists and DJs to be announced
Friday 23rd April from 8pm**

**Entry £5 / £4 with flyer / £3 if
wearing Love Music Hate Racism
T-Shirt**

Never has there been a more important time in the fight against fascism and racism.

Nazi Nick Griffin, the BNP leader, hopes to use his *Question Time* appearance to further increase the respectability of his fascist organisation and challenge for the seat in Barking at the General Election, where the BNP already have a number of councillors.

The racist English Defence League have many fascists and convicted football thugs in their ranks and are using Islamophobia to build a street-fighting force to terrorise local Asian and ethnic minority communities.

In Stoke, where the EDL were not challenged, these thugs rampaged

through the streets attacking Asian people.

In Bolton in March, Unite Against Fascism (UAF) and Love Music Hate Racism (LMHR) mobilised to stop them.

We need to keep building the fight against the fascists. Many unions that call-centre workers are in, such as PCS, CWU and Unite, are affiliated to UAF and LMHR.

From the Love Music Hate Racism website -

"We use the energy of our music scene to celebrate diversity and involve people in anti-racist and anti-fascist activity as well as to urge people to vote against fascist candidates in elections."

Get involved in your local group and help stop the Nazis and racists gaining ground.

www.uaf.org.uk

www.lovemusichateracism.com

LONDON MEETING 10TH APRIL

This meeting is hosted by Call-Centre Workers in CWU Capital Branch.

Call-Centre Worker, a bulletin and a blog, was launched to build strong workplace union organisation in our call-centres.



Satanic mills...

Hundreds of thousands of workers in the UK now work in Call-Centres. Described by one victimised worker as the "bright satanic mills of the 21st century", many experience low pay, unreasonable targets and a bullying management.

The role of Call-Centre Worker is to build confidence and resistance inside these mills.

**From 7-9pm on Saturday
10th April at the Artillery
Arms, 102 Bunhill Row,
near Old Street tube.**

For more details ring Pat on
07913 701042

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