



## 300 SACKED: NOW FIGHT BACK

Over 300 people were sacked on the spot last Month from Telegen, one of Brighton's largest and longest standing call centres.

Workers turned up in the morning to be told by their bosses that the company had ceased trading and they had to leave immediately. The majority of the workers also checked their accounts to discover they hadn't been paid. Most people had lost two weeks worth of wages. One worker told local paper, *The Argus*, that he had to give up his flat.

Despite the impending liquidation, the company were still hiring dozens of staff up until the week of the closure. Managers even went as far as to lie to workers when they did not receive their wage slips, saying that 'the printers were not working'.

Jonathan, one of the sacked, said "We were handed leaflets from the creditors telling us of the situation, whilst being shut outside the building. Everyone felt helpless and shocked that something like this can be allowed to happen."

"We've been kept in the dark right from the word go up to now. We were told that we might be able to claim redundancy pay, but were given no details as to how much or even how we can get it."

John, 59, said: "There were a lot of really intelligent, degree-educated people working there, who just couldn't find jobs anywhere else."

Call centres are one of the biggest employers in Brighton, with companies like American Express and Lloyds, all with extremely high



turnovers, hiring temp and agency staff of all ages, from students to those close to retirement.

Telegen is another UK workplace that has gone bust and dropped hundreds of workers at a time. It also shows why workers in call-centres and other workplaces not traditionally known for trade union strength need to get organised.

David Cameron is promising "decades of pain". Telegen workers found out what that meant recently and the 22nd June Budget has put more jobs and services under threat.

Union drives in call centres around London and up and down the country have shown that it is possible to organise in these workplaces. Fights for fair pay and better working conditions have been increasingly successful over the last two years in places where workers have got themselves organised.

The Right to Work campaign has set up a public meeting in Brighton in response to the sackings. Speakers from Brighton Trades Council, the Green party and the CWU will be encouraging people to organise in their workplaces and to fight against the attacks planned for the months ahead.

## THE CALL CENTRE WORKERS' CHARTER

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

### 1. That every call centre worker receives at least £7.85 per hour

The Mayor's recommended London Living Wage is £7.85 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.

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# ORGANISING A UNION IN YOUR WORKPLACE

## GETTING STARTED

### BY A CHARITY CALLER

Today, there are 7 million workers in trade unions in Britain out of a workforce of around 28 million.

That means that there are a 21 million people that have no protection, vulnerable to summary sackings, attacks on their terms and conditions and pay cuts in these recessionary times.

The need for union organisation is apparent in the UK's call-centres that employ over 700,000 workers currently.

Call-centre workers are notoriously low-paid, many are on casual, part-time or agency contracts and stressed out by daily targets and poor conditions.

There are a number of call-centres where workers have organised to improve pay and better conditions for all, and if you are not sure how to get started, here are some suggestions.

### FIND THE ISSUE

In every workplace there will be at least one issue that will raise the hackles of workers there, but of course that will vary from call-centre to call-centre.

Identifying that issue, getting people together to discuss a strategy about how you can change it and uniting people behind that campaign is the key to kicking off a union drive.

Finding the issue should not be too difficult, but does assume that you've worked there more than a wet



*living wages for research workers: Unite New Zealand fighting over pay*

Wednesday. Chatting to people in the breaks, in the canteen, in between calls, the *issue* is bound to crop up.

A number of union activists have had some success in call-centres organising around these issues:

### PAY

This is the issue that will interest and unite most call-centre workers.

Many call-centre workers earn just the National Minimum Wage (NMW) of £5.80 per hour or just above.

In London, there have been a number of pay campaigns organised groups of workers like cleaners and call-centre workers have demanded and won the

London Living Wage (LLW) – a figure of £7.85 per hour calculated by the London Mayor's Office that takes into account the increased housing and transport costs in the capital.

Some of these campaigns just began with a simple petition amongst the workforce.

It is also useful to find out what other call-centre workers in the area are earning and how much profit your company made.

You can find out your companies profits by contacting your union's research department or you can pay £1 and download their accounts from <http://www.companieshouse.gov.uk/>

## TARGETS

Is there a call-centre worker in the world that does not shudder at the words “wrap” or “non-productive” time? Or worse still “below target”? Every single day, and many work late and weekends, call-centre workers are under pressure to hit target. Hit your target? You don’t have enough contacts, you need to wrap-up your calls quicker. Have enough contacts? Well the non-productive report shows that you’ve spent too long in the bathroom and getting water or tea – keep dialling! Non-productive time okay, well we’ve just been listening in to your calls and you can be more energetic in your calls, and so it goes on – keep dialling!

It is difficult to affect a change in targets, but some union activists have circulated health and safety surveys that have helped to make workers think about their job and what it does to their stress levels and why it might be an idea to get together with other workers that are in the same boat.

## IT'S THE SMALL THINGS THAT MATTER

You may find it easier to organise around some minor issues. These are the kind of issues that may seem petty, but are the kind of issues that can niggle and be quite important to workers. And if you can shift management on these issues, then this will give confidence to workers.

For instance, many call-centres insist on a dress code, despite customers not being able to be offended or influenced by what the worker is wearing. A number of activists have campaigned and won a relaxation of these rules. Campaigning to ensure that there is adequate supplies of soap in the toilets can also help build the union. And any health and safety issue in the workplace is a strong card.

And the more workers that are involved in changing the conditions, however small, the more that workers feel that it is their victory.



*big smiles for a publicity shot: but in reality most of us get bossed around to keep up with targets*

## BIGGER ISSUES

Building the union can also help open discussions about the wider issues in society.

For instance, union activists in a Glasgow supermarket, another industry blighted by low union density and as a result poor pay and poor conditions, produced a union newsletter that challenged the sexism faced by many women check-out workers from customers and managers.

Many unions are affiliated to such groups as Unite Against Fascism, Love Music Hate Racism and Stop The War. TUC Aid made an appeal for funds in response to the earthquake in Haiti, funds that went to trade unions in Haiti that were part of the relief effort.

Organising a collection can give a profile to the union.

## GETTING PEOPLE TOGETHER

When you’ve identified the issue or have a range of issues to choose from, you need to meet and plan a strategy with your workmates.

You need to find a time that most people can make and a venue that is near to the workplace but not a venue that your managers are known to use. If

you can get a community centre or café, this is probably preferable. Not everyone likes pubs. But in some places, a pub is the only available venue. Most pubs have a function room, but it is not ideal to hold meetings in the main bar. Many pubs will allow you to use the function room for free if it is a quiet night and they get some custom.

If it is the first meeting, it is advisable to advertise by word of mouth only. And don’t worry if attendance is sparse. You’ve made a start. And even if you have just a couple of other people, you can discuss what is possible and together you can build for the next event.



## USE YOUR UNION'S RESOURCES

Every union will have a branch structure.

And those branches will have resources: experienced officials (they can help workers that are facing disciplinarys or have a grievance, they can also help leaflet the workplace without the fear of victimisation), computer and printing facilities and money that can pay for the hire of venues, for instance.

Union branch officials should be very helpful. They want, and given the fact that union membership has declined in the past 30 years, and they need to recruit new members.

They can also provide training for union reps inside the workplace, the most important initially will be to get activists on organising and aiding workers at disciplinary and grievance courses.

Every union has an organising strategy and a team of full-time organisers that help with your campaign.

## PUBLICISE THE UNION

Activists need to communicate with other workers and a good way is through newsletters and bulletins.

Many call-centre employers are poor at communicating with their staff and it usually only takes one newsletter to show that the union is better at informing staff about work-related issues than the management.

Again getting other activists to write for, design and distribute the newsletter is important, but names should be left off articles.

You can also get people's email addresses and mobile numbers to stay in touch, if even they are not quite ready to join.



*A trade union's strength is based on solidarity and collective action. Here Communication Workers Union members working for Royal Mail stand up to lay-offs and privatisation*

## RECRUIT!

Many of the 21 million non-unionised workers have not signed up to a union because they simply have not been asked. Every worker that signs a petition or takes a newsletter should be asked and some will be pleased that there is a union and will join straight-away. Many will object, the most common objections are related to fear.

Remember: every worker in the UK has a legal right to be a member of a trade union and everyone has a legal right to be active in a union.

However this is not enough, because somehow a number of bosses have found ways to get rid of union activists. The key argument is safety in numbers.

But also, showing the union is prepared to defend workers, success in campaigning around issues, relating to the daily problems that face workers; all these factors can increase confidence and reduce the fear.

And you will also find that in many of call-centres, bosses are unused to

dealing with workers that are organising and know their rights. The initial response of many managers is to try to instil fear. But if workers stick together and they find that they have failed, concessions are often made.

Then the union is really up and running!

Below are a few unions that have many call-centre workers in their ranks.

Or you can contact us here at Call-Centre Worker, collectively our editorial board has a great deal of experience in organising in call-centres. Call us on 07595 245494 or 07875 077607

Main unions organising in call-centres:

Communication Workers Union (CWU) [www.cwu.org](http://www.cwu.org), 0800 731 7434

Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) [www.pcs.org.uk](http://www.pcs.org.uk), 020 7801 2691

Unite, [www.unitetheunion.com](http://www.unitetheunion.com), Tel: 020 7611 2637, mobile: 07976 844 228.

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