

Austria: fight against "bad apple" call centres starting to pay off

Since 2006, Austria's private sector employees' union GPA-djp has been fighting sweatshop work paces, continual monitoring of staff and bogus self-employment in call centres. Five years and two union campaigns later, working conditions are on the up.

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Computer technologies mean that call centre workers can be continuously monitored. Few last more than three years.

Image: © Findlay Kember, Belga/AFP



1. Sandra Ernst-Kaiser,
"Das ist eine
Schlangengrube", *Der
Standard*, 4 August 2010.

"It's a still-emerging, poorly organised sector well known for its repeated breaches of labour law."

Tearful employees near breaking point, oppressive, non-stop computer management of work organization allowing or forbidding breaks according to the flow of calls, and a deeply distasteful trend to evade employment law by the wholesale use of bogus self-employed! A horror story of normal working conditions in a big Viennese call centre reported in the *Der Standard* daily newspaper¹ in the summer of 2010 sparked a scandalised public debate and a huge readers postbag. Austria's private sector employees' union GPA-djp has long been keeping first-hand and very close tabs on the call centre sector. In 2006, it launched a large-scale labour action campaign to improve employment and working conditions, but finding that too little progress had been made, a second onslaught followed in spring 2010.

"We reckon that Austria has about 300 call centre firms, close on a dozen of which are in the big league. In all, the sector employs 30 000 people, 80% of them women", says Andrea Schober, head of GPA-djp's contingent jobs unit. "It's a still-emerging, poorly organised sector well known for its repeated breaches of labour law. There are several employers' associations that don't necessarily see eye to eye, and that makes social dialogue harder. They tend to be staffed by students and low-skilled workers. Working conditions

are highly oppressive and pay on the low side at between 1000 and 1500 euros net for a full-timer. So not many call centre agents stick it out for more than two or three years. One result is that it is very poorly unionised, 5% of employees at best", she says.

Eight minutes from Vienna's historic centre, on the left bank of the Danube, and a stone's throw from the UN buildings lies the upmarket business district of DonauCity, home to economic heavyweights like IBM, Sanofi-Aventis, Tele 2 and Strabag. It is here that the German firm Walter Services, one of the top three call centre operators in Europe, has its Viennese central offices. After one or two weeks' cursory training in using the workstation and "call handling techniques" – topped up by a day or two's specific training if needed – the new employees are thrown into the fray with work schedules that can stretch from 7 to 20 hours and more a day, weekdays and weekends alike. "Our call centre staff take and make from 100 to 150 calls a day. That's huge. Sometimes, it will be for competition entrants, so contacts are quite friendly. Mostly, though, it's complaints and torrents of abuse. So we have to put up with fast-paced work plus callers in a bad mood. Stress levels are high and we have a rate of absenteeism 2 to 3% above the national average. It's not appalling, but it does speak volumes", says

Jürgen Leister, chairman of the central works council at Walter Services Austria, which employs over 3000 people at two sites. "The problem with our industry is firms that will do whatever it takes to win contracts, which can include using bogus self-employed – which is illegal – so as not to have to pay their holiday pay or health insurance. They undercut prices on tenders. It's cutthroat competition", he says. Fixated on their operating results and profit margins, bosses in this still-emerging industry use every possible means to squeeze out maximum productivity for the minimum employee costs.

A major union campaign

In 2006, GPA launched its first major campaign for better working conditions and to halt evasion of labour laws and collective agreements. "At the time, we got so many calls for help and complaints that we had to create a position specially for the call centre industry", recalls Irene Holzbauer, chief legal officer of the Vienna labour federation (*Arbeitskammer*), a specifically Austrian organization parallel to the unions that provides help and representation for Austria's workers. Even Milosh Godina, boss of the Tele2 call centre who is behind several initiatives to improve the sector's image, admits after a fashion that something is not right. "We mustn't forget that our employees have to work under enormous pressure. It's a huge enterprise, a service factory, that demands not just technical knowledge but also a lot of personal involvement and patience", he says in reply to the *Der Standard* article. The union campaigns are specifically focussing on the psychological pressures on call centre staff whose every activity is monitored on the pretext of compiling figures for itemised customer charging. "Everything employees do is tracked to the minute from the time they log on at the workstation – the length and number of calls, breaks, outcome of calls, the lot - all put into a statistical database. The hard thing is to control who goes into it and how the data are used for monitoring. We can only do that by cross-referencing with the employees concerned", says Jürgen Leister.

Time and again GPA President Wolfgang Katzian points the finger at cheating by contract. The 5 to 6000 call centre agents working even up to a year ago as "self-employed" are usually nothing of the sort, because independent contractors are normally free to choose where they work, and when and how they do the work ordered. Pay is often fixed and may not allow for overtime or night work. Working hours agreements are also widely flouted. Katzian also argues that "real" call centre employees are routinely undergraded so as to keep pay low. The sector collective agreement provides for six categories of employees and pay defined by criteria that include the level of difficulty of the information to be conveyed ("simple", "complex", etc.). Where the employee stands in this scale determines their pay and prospects. GPA estimates that a third of employees may be undergraded.

The union argues that these practices not only violate labour law, but also seriously short-change the social security system. "Contrary to popular opinion, call centre employees are covered by a collective agreement, but it's the general business one (*Kollektivvertrag für das Allgemeine Gewerbe – Ed.*). The coming months will find us calling on health insurance organizations and regional labour inspectorates to carry out general checks", Wolfgang Katzian announced in spring 2010. At the same time, the union stepped up its information and support to employees, set up a telephone hotline and an Internet forum to swap advice and strategies on setting up elections for works councils. "We also obviously backed court cases by a number of self-employed workers claiming and getting employee status", says Andrea Schober.

More works councils

Five years and two campaigns have obviously not solved all problems, but things have got much better. Ms Schober reports that the number of works councils has risen from 18 to 70%, while bogus self-employment is down two-thirds, from 9000 people in 2006 to about 3000 today. Progress on working conditions, work paces, pay and classification is less significant. "The collective agreement for

general business applies to jobs that could not be classified in other sectors. So it's very much a rag-bag with little binding force. At the same time, it's a collective agreement that is very hard to change because the jobs covered differ so widely that when it comes to renegotiating or adding new provisions, you rarely get a compromise across sectors", says Andrea Schober, who argues that with a workforce of 30 000, the call centre industry has long since earned the right to its own collective agreement. This is a view shared only by the workers and trade unionists. "But given the low union membership in the sector, I am not expecting changes to this in the next ten years", says Jürgen Leister. And there is still a big job to do on preventive health and reducing the hardships of work. "Walter Services is a business that abides by the rules and has taken on no bogus self-employed since 2007. And in 2004, management did not oppose the election of a works council as some companies did", says Jürgen Leister. By contrast, the importance of getting rid of gruelling work paces and stress seems not to have percolated up to the boardroom. The chairman of Walter Services works council points to the lack of preventive health care, antistress programmes or facilities and places for winding down. ●

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