

No Call for Action? Why There Is No Union (Yet) in Philippine Call Centers

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This contribution presents findings from a qualitative study which focused on young urban professionals in the Philippines who work(ed) in international call centers – workplaces usually characterized by job insecurity and other forms of precarity, factory-like working conditions, and disembeddedness. Nevertheless, trade unions in these centers have not come into existence. Why collective action is not chosen by call center agents as an option to tackle the above mentioned problems – this is what the research project this article is based on tried to understand. After outlining some work related problems identified by Filipino call center agents, the article will focus on the strategies the agents employ to counter these problems (mainly accommodation and everyday resistance). By highlighting five objective and five subjective reasons (or reasons by circumstances and reasons by framing), we conclude that it is not repressive regulation policies, but rather the formative power and the internalization of discourses of rule within individual life strategies that are preventing the establishment of unions and other collective action structures.

Keywords: Call Centers; Coping Strategies; Everyday Resistance; Philippines; Precarity

Der folgende Beitrag präsentiert die Ergebnisse einer qualitativen Studie unter jungen Berufstätigen, die in internationalen Callcentern im städtischen Raum in den Philippinen arbeite(te)n – an Arbeitsplätzen, die gewöhnlich durch hohe Jobunsicherheit und andere Formen der Prekarität, wie fabrik-ähnliche Arbeitsbedingungen und Entbettung charakterisiert sind. Trotzdem wurden bis dato keine Gewerkschaften in den Call Centers gegründet. Warum kollektives Handeln unter ArbeiterInnen in Callcentern nicht als Option für die Lösung der oben genannten Probleme identifiziert wird, stellt die leitende Frage der Untersuchung dar, auf der der folgende Artikel aufbaut. Nach der Skizzierung einiger arbeitsgebundener Probleme, die von philippinischen ArbeiterInnen in Callcentern identifiziert werden, fokussiert der Artikel auf ihre Strategien, diesen Problemen zu begegnen (hauptsächlich mittels Anpassung und Formen alltäglichen Widerstands). Indem wir fünf objektive (umstandsgebundene) und fünf subjektive (framing-gebundene) Ursachen hervorheben, kommen wir zu dem Schluss, dass nicht repressive Regulierungen, sondern die formative Macht und Internalisierung von Regeln

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innerhalb einzelner Lebensstrategien die Entstehung von Gewerkschaften und anderen Strukturen kollektiven Handelns verhindern.

Schlagnworte: *Bewältigungsstrategien; Callcenter; Philippinen; Prekarität; alltäglicher Widerstand*

Introduction

Are the unorganized organizable? This question haunts sociologists as well as activists in Europe nowadays. Especially social uncertainty (precarity) of life paths and working conditions seem to aggravate this dilemma. Bourdieu (1998) and Dörre (2006) are just two out of many who believe that precarity discourages collective political protest and that the lack of biographical perspectives caused by precarity (allegedly) leads to despair and depression.

Also in the Philippines, activists are concerned that young urban professionals do not organize themselves and often accuse them of being politically disengaged. Agents in International Call Centers, which nowadays offer employment to hundreds of thousands of well-educated young people, are specifically highlighted in this concern. In this case, however, reactions of despair to a precarious life are not evident, or at least not among the young urban professionals interviewed in this study. Three out of four respondents (of altogether a total of 40 participants) claimed that they have “clear life plans”; four out of five strongly disagreed with the statement that “when a person is born, how things are going to work out for him/her is already decided”; and the same number likewise strongly disagreed with the statement that “seeing the way things are, I find it hard to be hopeful for the world” .

Likewise, in the last years, one could witness from the Mediterranean up to Chile that young professionals are not per se in despair due to their precarious lives. Recent protest movements in Portugal and Spain, or Egypt have even proven that strategies to counter precarity are not necessarily confined to ‘muddling through’ and can actually catalyze political reactions and collective mobilization. These examples indicate that it is inaccurate to consider precarious living and working conditions as causes for the lack of political mobilization and collective political protest as, for instance, Bourdieu would assert.

This paper though does not aim at providing an answer to the question of whether young urban professionals in the Philippines may soon emulate their Mediterranean counterpart and carry their disgruntlement into the public sphere. After having ruled out the more general assumption that precarity triggers despair and thus inaction, we will rather concentrate on identifying alternative reasons of why collective action is not arising among call center agents.

After outlining some work-related problems that Filipino call center agents identify as significant, the article will focus on common but *not* collective strategies that agents employ to counter these problems (mainly accommodation and everyday resistance). In the second part of the article, five objective and five subjective reasons (or reasons by circumstances and reasons by framing) are identified as of why collective action and trade unions are scarce in the Philippine call center setting.

This paper presents an overview of the findings and preliminary conclusions of a qualitative research with 40 currently employed and former call center agents in Metro Manila, Davao City, and Dumaguete City in the Philippines; 28 of them took part in all three interview stages. This study – which is part of a three-year comparative research (2010-2012) by the University of Bonn on the making of new social movements under the conditions of precarity and transnational location in South-East Asia, supported by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* – included biographical interviews; problem-focused interviews on how to cope with work-related problems; and finally, interviews on the political orientations of call center agents. Additionally, we used secondary literature on Filipino call center agents *and* complementary Indian call center agents (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009; Taylor, Scholarios, Noronha, & D’Cruz, 2007). The latter was included as the situation in Indian call centers proves highly comparable with that in the Philippines, and analytical literature on Indian call centers offers a more detailed picture especially with regard to collective action and unionization.

Not an Unproblematic Industry

Nearly all employees in international call centers in the Philippines have finished at least a few years of college, several even graduated from college. They have studied

to become nurses, engineers, anthropologists, or political scientists. Given the scarcity of better paid opportunities in their chosen courses and professions and the limited employment opportunities for those with a liberal arts or science degree, high pay and easy entry in call centers have enticed mostly young individuals to join the workforce. Hence, the Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) sector has become the fastest growing provider of employment for Filipino college graduates, employing more than 600,000 people by end of 2011.

Job dissatisfaction and high work stress are widespread among call center agents. The findings of this research reaffirm former findings on the nature of call center work (Fabros, 2007; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009) and already outlined earlier in this journal (Reese, 2008a). Despite the glowing promise projected by job offers at call centers as a place of self-realization, it could be observed among the respondents that the less the work in the call center resembles their chosen course (and the less autonomous and challenging the position is), the more they feel that they are wasting their talents, and the less they see call center work as a career. This is reflected in the common assertion of: “Do I really want to touch the lives of North American people? Na-ah.”

The central aim of the research though was not to capture ‘objective’ situations of ‘exploitation’, but rather to find out how people deal with their dissatisfaction and if this may lead to protest – maybe even in a collective manner. This research direction was identified because social movements and political socialization theories agree that readiness to political action (*Politische Aktivierungsbereitschaft*) and political action itself do not (mainly) spring from ‘objective criteria’ – be it precarity, poverty, or social inequality. People also have to (subjectively) suffer under such a crisis (the reasons for which should be attributed externally); they have to “dare to protest”, for which next to “a minimum of education and self-confidence . . . various resources and personal qualities are required”; and, it finally needs “categories creating collective identities” (Schmitt, 2006, p.19). Hence, Schmitt draws the conclusion that “the emergence of social protest is a process with lots of requirements” (p. 19).

In order to claim rights, it is usually not enough to have an awareness of such rights (framing), or a sense of injustice, (relative) deprivation, and denied dignity (Piven & Cloward, 1986; Scott, 1990; Thompson, 1963). It is also important to believe that these rights can be enforced and that violations can be remedied. These,

likewise, rely on the perception/detection of existing political spaces and favorable opportunity structures that would increase the likelihood of successful action: “For a protest movement to develop out of the traumata of everyday life”, as Piven and Cloward (1986) assert, “the disadvantages and disorders experienced by people must be considered as unjust as well as alterable” (p. 36). Here, collective protest is usually only the culmination of a series of protests, starting off as everyday resistance and in the form of a hidden transcript (Scott, 1990).

But indeed, there are several issues which respondents to this study consider problematic. Next to performance pressures, which a majority of them consider a major or significant (*pinakagrabe/grabe*) problem, issues like the denial of vacation and sick leaves, forced leave (without payment), the lack of security of tenure and easy termination, or excessive and tedious workloads were perceived as “(*pinaka*) *grabe*”. A considerable number of them also consider the lack of due process in cases of termination or that they have no say in working conditions as a major problem. (Although, a significant number finds this latter problem manageable [or *OK lang*, as expressed in everyday language] or did not mention it at all.) Despite the relatively high pay, almost half of the research participants (12 out of 28) also categorized both issues of low wage and high deductions as pressing and significant (while 12 said it does not arise as a problem for them).

However, for quite some agents (including the respondents), there is not much to heavily complain about (*pinakagrabe*) when it comes to their working conditions. Despite the fact that the pressures of mass servicing are unrelenting, call center work provides real benefits and increased autonomy outside of production, which agents prize quite highly. Many agents do not necessarily consider themselves oppressed, calling themselves instead as “stressed out”.

Coping Strategies

Because the reason to work in the call center industry is foremost economic, frontline call center workers struggle to positively construct the workplace and learn ways to cope in order to deal with various levels of precarity (Fabros, 2007; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007).

One of these ways is *identification*, done by embracing the imperatives of the call center regime. One respondent claims: “I do believe in the products which I am troubleshooting or handling. So it’s not that difficult to sell, not difficult to love the products, so it’s not difficult to love the job.” Other agents associate themselves with the company and its policies. Regarding overtime, one respondent had this to say:

“If they do ask you for overtime . . . you would understand because you would know: If we are going to lose half of those 200 calls, that would be a loss for the company . . . if it’s a loss to the company, it’s our loss as well cause it’s the company who is paying us.”

Others resort to *adjustment* and *submission* – not agreeing to, but simply accepting the conditions of the workplace as inevitable. Complaining is considered as whining or as ‘unprofessional’. On the number of calls taken by the agents, a respondent said: “Sometimes, it hurts, like you’re so tired, your throat is so dry ... but you could not really complain about it, about changing the way things are.” Another agent explains that: “Eventually you’ll get used to it. It’s already normal, although inside you rebel against it.” Another says: “You don’t really have a choice . . . your option is either you can resign and get more time for yourself or you accept that you don’t have time for yourself, then you only have to work, you only have to take up calls.” It is in this spirit that half of the respondents said the monotonous and routinely work is *OK lang*, one out of four does not even have an issue with it at all.

A strong belief in God’s providence has also been mentioned by several respondents, which could be interpreted to rationalize submission. Such is expressed by one of them in this way: “I believe that there’s always a hand that guides us, that no matter how much you want to, it will always guide you to something else . . . I believe that there is always a purpose” (male agent, 35).

Another way of coping can be to resort to *split off* from the ‘real life’, a term often heard to label the life outside of the call center. This kind of coping can especially be located among former activists who struggle with the fact that “before, we were fighting the imperialists and now we are serving them”, as well as artists (singers and writers) who especially suffer under the lowbrow work in the call centers. They live two different lives and leave the real persons that they are behind once they go to their workplace – making activism in the workplace more unlikely. This is shown in the response by an agent who was once an activist (and is now an NGO worker):

“I would not take [problems in the workplace] personally ... I know that even if I’m not doing good in that

[i.e. work performance], I know I'm still an intelligent person; I know I'm capable of other things . . . I can write, I can speak to other people . . . it's not the basis of my personhood; it's just my job."

Such split off though can also be an expression of self-management (Selbstführung) – just like identification and adjustment – by which agents condition themselves for work to be able to handle the demands of the job. This is considered by governmentality studies as “governing from a distance” and as the main means of neo-liberal governmentality (Opitz, 2004; Reese, 2004). This is illustrated in the statement of a respondent saying: “The moment you step inside the company, you have to totally log yourself out from (your) problems ... it’s just a matter of how you manage your emotions, yourself. . . .”

Being able to manage oneself might even be a source of pride for being a professional. Like for this 26-year old female respondent who shared:

"I realized, all you need to is . . . you should adopt it, you should adopt to the changes, you should adopt the pressure and eventually you will love the job, then you'd feel proud of yourself. Hey, I can stay awake the whole night."

Professionalism also goes along with finding the mistake in oneself: “Maybe you wouldn’t be issued a termination order if you didn’t do something wrong in your job,” as one respondent said. Professionalism also includes keeping up a notion of agency even in difficult situations and criticizing colleagues of being a *reklamador* (habitual complainant). As one agent said: “There are others who always blame the company, company, company . . . You have the will to change your life so why rely on the hands of other people . . . They really overstretch themselves.”

Not every coping though should be understood as making ends meet and even fooling oneself. Indeed there are at least traits in the call center work that agents consider *fulfilling*. Aiming to be helpful, they believe that they are able to be of help by assisting callers (e.g. old people or disaster victims calling a hotline) and so they aim to give satisfaction to customers – a notion fed by the management side: “Agents are advisers who help people fix their problems” (Executive Director Jojo Uligan of the *Call Center Association in the Philippines*, personal communication, in Ermitanio, 2012). Feelings of fulfillment are also oftentimes present when agents are able to hit performance metrics or resolve issues especially with irate callers.

At the same time, this ambition for self-fulfillment and the sense of professionalism which is “capturing the essence of agents’ lived experience . . . [and] mak(ing) agents accept stringent work systems and job design elements, techno-bureaucratic

controls and the primacy of the customer” (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009, p.72) serves as an entry point for dissent. The delivery of so-called ‘good work’ is systematically obstructed by the relations of production, which hurts the employees’ pride of doing their work well. Like in the case of a female agent who was troubleshooting for the company’s cell phone products – models which she never actually saw except in an online manual which the company provided her with.

The frustration that management does not listen to the views and ideas of agents is likewise an entry point for dissatisfaction, as an agent says: “(W)e have suggestions . . . they don’t know the real issue at work . . . there are things we are aware of that supervisors are not aware of . . . so we are suggesting but they are still the ones that will be followed.”

Self-management though does not make external management (*Fremdführung*) dispensable as people do not always ‘want what they should’ (*wollen, was sie sollen*). Therefore, instilling a self-construction as professional, e.g. as done in job advertisements, is complemented by surveillance and monitoring techniques which at times are reminiscent of Bentham’s panopticon, where inmates always feel observed without seeing the one observing them. An example for this is recording calls or documenting the transactions done within the IT-based interaction between agent and callers.

Hidden and Open Individual Protest

The narratives of several research participants are not only marked by stories of coping. Significant everyday resistance could be identified in the narratives of nearly every second respondent, “small, seemingly trivial daily acts through which subordinate individuals or groups undermine – rather than overthrow – oppressive relations of power” (Groves & Chang, 2002, p. 316), *as well as* open protest on an individual basis – be it in the form of ‘voice’ with the human relations department or by ‘exit’ exemplified by call center hopping or even leaving the industry.

Individual struggles against the ‘system’ are evident with call center agents who have familiarized the ‘insides’ and who have evolved ways of challenging the status within the bounds of strict rules of operations, for as long as it does not threaten employment. An agent phrases it the following way: “There are lots of things you

cannot do, especially on a call . . . (but) there are lots of crimes you can do, until you get caught.” Agents found ways of subverting the control of the panopticon over the process, which is also a source of pride for them. In seemingly trivial matters, some tend to bend certain floor policies.

Respondents share a variety of ways in asserting themselves to irate callers. Since there is a strong policy over call-releasing (hanging up), agents typically put up with such callers by cursing at them while putting the phone on mute or on hold and making the customer wait on the line for a long time until they hang up, or getting back in other ways possible.

But while the everyday resistance of subalterns shows that they have not consented to dominance and resist to being totally converted into a docile body, many of these actions might as well be classified as adaptation strategies, which make work easier to bear than as disturbing the process of accumulation. Agents calling these actions ‘stress out’ rather than ‘resistance’, offers a hint of this perspective. Fabros (2007) explains that “these forms of resistance have been practiced within spaces available, without considerably altering relations and conditions in this global enterprise” (p. 170). “Interventions do not result in any considerable improvements in work conditions or bargaining capacities of call center workers”. (Fabros, p. 273)

“Everyday resistance” is not even necessarily detrimental to the interest of their employers and may even be a form of governance to leave marginal arenas for alternative practices to the subalterns (here, to ‘stress out’), serving the reproduction of the agents’ performance and allowing them to believe that they can exert some agency and resistance. In this sense, McKay (2006, p.179) states that

“workers necessarily help constitute the labor regimes they consent to or resist. In spite of the benefits of high-tech work to workers’ personal lives, without collective organization, such individualized or ‘asymmetric agency’ does not challenge management authority in production, thus demonstrating how workers’ actions and discourses can simultaneously challenge and reproduce their own subordination and capital’s flexible accumulation strategies”.

However, everyday resistance and irony may not only serve as valve that helps to make the pressure bearable but might also be “building blocks for more manifest resistance against structures and apparatuses to control” (Scott, 1990, p. 57).

Why is Collective Protest so Sparse? And the Unions Even Fewer?

As mentioned above, there are instances when individuals resist not only 'everyday', and cautiously so as not to be caught, but also protest openly. This is done on a case to case basis, depending on the kind of situations the agents consider to have breached their personal limits of what they view as just and reasonable (*tama na, sobra na*), the resources they have command over, and on how promising they consider the tearing down "the political cordon sanitaire between the hidden and the public transcript" (Scott, 1990, p.19). While some agents put up with supervisors or account managers when they are humiliated on the floor or shouted at during calls, others publically defy the company, like by refusing to work overtime, especially if unpaid. These are individual acts of protests though.

"Forms of resistance have yet to take on a more organized and collective character to substantially transform bargaining power of workers in order to establish a level of control over the pace, content, direction, context and over-all conditions of their day-to-day work"

as Fabros (2007, p. 270) concludes her study on call center regimes and experiences in the Philippines.

There have been protests staged collectively in call center settings in the Philippines. More than half of the respondents report that they have experienced taking action together with others, although it is only in one out of the four cases when the issues were raised beyond the team level, i.e. with the management. Oftentimes, court cases are raised against erring companies, mainly for reasons of undue termination and non-payment of salaries. Such is the case involving 664 Cebu-based agents who filed a legal suit not individually but collectively (Mosqueda, 2012). Furthermore, the taking of legal actions is singular and usually only initiated after the employees have left the call center they are protesting against.

Efforts of union building, however, show more or less nil results, despite several attempts by radical political groups and moderate labor federations (especially the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, and party-lists and labor centers from the orthodox Left spectrum). An organizing project initiated in 2007 by the International Labor Organization (ILO), which involved major trade union federations, did not successfully lead to the setting-up of a sustainable union. Expert interviews in this research with personnel of organizations whose efforts to organize agents were in

vain revealed that, up to now, they only attained the role of serving as support in filing cases and as givers and sources of advice. This failure in organizing unions persists, despite the fact that the (scant) research done on the organizing potential in call centers (Sale & Bool, 2005) shows that there are more agents who are open to joining a union than those who are against it. Likewise, in this research, nearly every second respondent considered the ‘no-union’ policy within call centers as a problem and said that they would be willing to join a union; while another 25 percent at least said “it depends”. Only one out of four are hostile to the idea of unions. The reasons for the lack of collective actions on interest representation, therefore, have to be located elsewhere. This study proposes ten probable reasons; five of them are due to external circumstances (lack of resources and political opportunities) while five can be described as internal (framing).

1. The “no-union” policy discourages some agents as they fear termination or discrimination

During their trainings, call center employees are usually discouraged by management from joining or forming unions. In some companies, a ‘no-union’ provision is even clearly stipulated in pre-employment contracts. Instigating such formations therefore spells a threat to their employment. As one agent reveals: “Once they [the management] hear you provoking or doing things like that [fighting for your right], you are immediately out of the company . . . Of course, if you’re against the company, it leads you nowhere. You lose.” An agent in Manila conveys her apprehension by saying that:

“There’s this cloud hanging over our heads that if you’re too hard on the company there’d come a time that they’d replace you, then you have to pay for your bills . . . here comes me, I have to pay for my apartment, I have to pay for my brother’s enrollment.”

These fears are aggravated by the fact that, in Filipino culture, the ones speaking out are easily considered as *disturbo* or “troublemakers” and *hirit* (talking back or disagreeing) is frowned upon. An agent shares that during an apprenticeship in a fast-food chain: “My co-trainee told me that management said that I was an activist. What?! Just because you speak your mind, just because you raised a question, they tag you as an activist.”

2. Forming unions in call centers is perceived as futile given the transient character of the workforce [and the accounts]

Many young agents do not consider the industry as their lifetime career and they do not intend to stay in such a workplace for a long time. Additionally, frequent changes of employment are believed to hinder the deeper understanding of shared affectedness, the development of solidarity and of common interest patterns – all prerequisites for association organization. The interaction spaces that exist – e.g. the teams the agents have been organized into by the management or any place outside of the call center which is no longer under surveillance of the management – (only) serve as a vehicle for discussion of work-related issues aside from account updates. Their mere existence does not suffice to trigger organizing.

Experiences of successful organizing amongst the precariously employed show that the few who lead (and push the ‘rank and file’) have been permanent in one location or have even been with one company over several years (cf. Girndt, 1997). Moreover, campaigns like the Justice for Janitors in the US, which is famous for its successes, have been planned and carried out over several years.

3. It is not clear whom the agents should turn to

“There are really huge violations against labor laws in the call center industry,” says a respondent, “but . . . you don’t know who to blame. You don’t really know whom to talk and bargain with.” Rapid changes in clients make it difficult for them to have a clear counterpart to turn to or mobilize against. Furthermore, these clients who should be held accountable are abroad and not visible in the tripartite container society, and hence, cannot be approached. Others even say that nobody is to be held responsible in particular: “You could not help it; it’s the system . . . You could not really complain about it, about changing the way things are. The supervisors don’t have control over it.”

4. Grievance procedures are a form of token participation

In almost all call centers, workers are encouraged to approach and settle issues with the Human Resource Department (HRD) individually or raise them during town hall sessions. This creates the imagination that it is easy to approach the HRD whenever

one has a grievance (*open door policy*). The image constructed by the management is this: There is no need for unions as the HRD takes up individual complaints, employers take care of employees' needs, and the interests of employers and employees go in the same direction. This is furthermore fostered by an atmosphere of congeniality and camaraderie created by fun initiatives or the first-name principle and the perception that employers value their professional employees.

Yet, most respondents doubt that their opinions are of great value to the company. An agent observes that: "You can tell your supervisors but they can't do anything much," as complaints may go unaddressed if supervisors are busy with an account. He elaborates that: "All you can do is tell your concerns, but it's up to the management to act on it . . . you can say your concern but I don't know if the management will act on it." A Manila respondent echoes this sentiment by saying that: "We had a grievance mechanism where you can rant but nothing happened." An agent from a different company affirms this, stating that: "How many times did they do surveys and still nothing happened; there's no improvement."

Town hall meetings are controversial as well. Management's responses to some issues, e.g. office facilities, are written in tarpaulins and publicly displayed in office premises. But, for several agents, major issues that they view as pressing are often unclearly answered, if responded to at all, or neglected.

Noronha and D'Cruz (2009) consider the participation mechanisms therefore as a "false claim, concerned only with impressing and misleading agents" (p. 165). This notion is shared by a respondent of this study who says that:

"I considered it [the participation mechanisms] as . . . a game by the management; it's a spectacle just to show that they have a grievance process . . . the management can tell [i.e. promise] them [the agents] everything . . . they're not in the company anymore when that's supposed to happen."

Another agent says that: "In the call centers, they want to prevent unions . . . they don't do union busting, they do union-avoidance . . . you have to give the democratic space so that (agents) would not think that they are being oppressed."

Agents who have experienced utilizing the grievance and participation mechanisms consider them mostly as token. Seven out of ten respondents in the study, therefore, consider no genuine grievance mechanisms to exist, with more than half of them considering this a (very) significant problem. Similarly, while several agents are impressed by the seemingly symmetrical relationship practiced between a boss

and a worker in call centers – contrary to the hierarchical Filipino society – most of them recognize that this kind of relational symmetry limits itself to the interpersonal surface, which does not necessarily manifest in work standards and dynamics that are essential to a worker's well-being. In the overall structure of authority, this emphasizes the agents' disadvantaged position – one wherein they cannot negotiate with management over matters of utmost concern for them, i.e. job security, account selection, work schedules, and rational work tasks, contract terms, or even in the implementation of trainings.

All in all, agents are fully aware that participation and grievance mechanisms are subordinate to production imperatives which at any time may override whatever feedback procedures have been put into place. “As long as they can squeeze out more from you, they will,” an agent believes (Fabros, 2007, p. 211). As an agent in this research concludes: “You might be performing (well) in other fields, but you'd be summed up in only one system: ‘We don't care how you manage your personal life; we just want this; and this alone.’”

But even if agents come to the conclusion that human resource management practices do not sufficiently address the grievances they have presented, in the Philippine call centers this does not (yet) spark organizing alternatives – be it in the form of unions or through company-independent redress systems.

5. Call Center hopping

Finally, it is often heard that the ease of moving from one call center to another (termed call center hopping) when problems arise might be a reason why hardly any collective action can be observed. *Exit*, ergo seems to be another coping mechanism for agents. With the mushrooming of the industry and the lack of qualified personnel, changing a call center company for another one presents an easy option. When asked what the respondents would do if they lose the job, “find another job” is easily articulated.

Circumstances hostile to unionizing alone though cannot comprehensively explain non-unionization in the Philippine call center sector. Many of the structural and external reasons for non-unionization mentioned so far also apply to call centers in the US or in Europe, wherein, however, a few unions have been set up. (This may also be

due to the fact that some of these societies are relatively densely unionized.) Other reasons, which can be classified as issues of *framing* (i.e. the way people perceive and construct the circumstances), seem to be equally important.

6. Individualism

People with considerable resources tend to believe that they can manage and thrive on their own. They believe they can rely on their individual capabilities for success. Schultheis and Schulz (2005) have documented among the precarized in Germany that the “ethic of achievement is very pronounced among those who believe to be able to make it” (p. 539). This is why they are less inclined to organize themselves collectively at least in socio-economic matters.

Agents are further induced by a corporate culture that encourages competitiveness and individualism. The display of performance statistics, for instance, is such a tool used by management to promote competition (in terms of productivity) among the workers, which affects ‘individualization’. Agents’ calls are considered their own and how these turn out depends on their individual communication skills. The only help they can get from other agents is encouragement. “It’s like you’re programmed . . . you don’t really work for the team; you’re working for yourself. You are just contributing something to the team” (male agent, 25). As a result, an agent’s scores are his/her own, and how one fares in the competition and mechanical dynamics of the workplace is one’s struggle for wage.

Fixing of wages and settling disputes are done individually. Employees are encouraged to not discuss salaries with each other and to think of salary figures as a purely personal issue. This not only prevents people from developing notions of relative deprivation (which could have a mobilizing effect), but also feeds to the idea of personal performance, which is also evident in most of the agents’ personal perspectives.

7. Violations of rights and the lack of humane working conditions are considered “normal”

Contractualization, e.g. workers getting terminated after a five-month probationary period, is typical for many parts of the Philippine service sector and has increased by about 20 percent in the past few years (Reese, in print), creating the impression that such is ‘normal’. When things are considered ‘normal’ or ‘without alternative’, they

evoke less protest. The same applies to the explicit ban on unionizing – a policy which many other companies have imposed as well, even if this goes against the Philippine Labor Code.

The necessity of finding a living (*hanapbuhay*) forces workers to accept nearly any working condition because “beggars cannot be choosers”, as a common saying in the Philippines goes. When one is a proletarian (i.e. one who has no control over the means of production), there is something worse than being exploited: Not to have work at all. The demand to have whatever kind of work takes paramount precedence, while the demand for humane work takes a backseat. A female agent (30), puts it clearly this way: “If you’re helping your family, . . . you won’t think of the hardships or the exhausting work inside; just think of the money that you can get [as an agent].”

It was also observed that the agents do not find it unjust to earn around five times less than their American counterparts who are doing exactly the same kind of work. The variations in the cost/standard of living are quickly regarded as a convenient justification for the disparity, even if the comparison of purchasing power only explains a difference of 200 to 300 percent (cf. United Bank of Switzerland, 2013). It can therefore be assumed that the acceptance of these wage differentials can be traced to the *habitualization* of one’s position in the current world order, i.e. of coming to terms with the fact that one belongs to a country which is supplying the rich countries with cheap or sought-after manpower as “servants of globalization”, as Rhacel Parreñas (2001) calls them in her book on the massive outward migration in the Philippines; or a *naturalization* of social inequality (Souza, 2008). Some respondents frame it as: “You have to accept the fate of the world . . . It’s life. It’s not fair”; and this is immediately followed by the claim that: “It’s kind of a blessing in disguise actually, here in the Philippines. Because it’s generating a lot of jobs.”

The phenomenon of “normalization” is closely connected to the strategies of downward comparison. Agents consider themselves to still be in a better situation than other workers (relative privilege instead of relative deprivation). The jobs in the BPO industry in developing countries are of reasonably good quality by local standards in terms of working and employment conditions (wages, hours of work, non-wage benefits, etc.). Seen relatively, these jobs are less precarious and easy to get. As an agent puts it well: “Because of the benefits and salaries, one cannot even think anymore of unionizing. What more could you ask for? You already have health benefits and the like.”

8. Trade Unions are Considered by them as Something for Workers

Furthermore, several researchers have observed that despite the fact that many of the issues faced by agents in mass service call centers are no different from those faced by their blue-collar counterparts, trade unions are considered by them as something for workers (Fabros, 2007; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009). Experiences of mass servicing are sidelined by highlighting academic backgrounds, the well-equipped working places (gyms included), and the above-average salaries they receive. They are “communication people” and their direct contact in service work should not be confused with the physical and menial work of blue-collar workers. However, despite the difficulty to completely ignore the fact that the repetitive, even robotic mode of work, makes call centers appear like factories, agents take pride in being able to “make something out of it”. Furthermore, being involved in sloganeering, picketing, and striking – activities commonly associated with trade unions – is considered as an unworthy demeanor of a professional. Management supports the strategy of dissimilarity by giving call center employees catchy designations and prestigious-sounding positions such as Customer Care Agent, Customer Support Agent, or Customer Support Executive.

9. The Stigma Attached to Unions

That unions do not have much appeal to agents is aggravated by the “stigma” (Aganon, 2008, p.124) attached to unions in the Philippines in general. Not only has the ‘no-union’ policy gotten more and more normal, it is also that membership in trade unions has in general reached new lows. Barely 5 percent of the workforce is organized into trade unions and a mere 13 percent of them are covered by collective bargaining agreements – which are not even deemed universally binding. Together with the rapid and steady decline in the number of trade organized workers, strikes have also dramatically dropped.

10. Underestimation of Market Power

Finally, this study has come to the observation that agents underestimate their market power as expressed in this response by a male agent (30): “It’s useless . . . they can always hire more agents if you strike.” What may hold true for factory workers is, however, questionable in the case of call center agents. As outlined above, the call center industry has difficulties in meeting its demand for personnel who have

the specific qualifications needed to sustain its operations (e.g. flawless English or communication skills). Furthermore, it can be considered highly unlikely that the call center industry would reach the point of moving out from the Philippines once the workforce would demand and organize for more in terms of better working conditions and benefits. Call centers demand very specific skills that are neither easy to find nor can be quickly developed, namely, the ability to speak the customer's language in an acceptable manner and to be familiar with the culture the callers come from. The call center industry has made the Philippines the world champion as far as voice-based operations are concerned. A significant number relocated their operations from India for the very reason that American customers complained about the British accent of Indian agents. It is very unlikely then that call centers would move on to Vietnam or China, as some factories did.

Prospects for Unionizing: Dim, but Not Impossible

This study concludes that the prospects for unions in the Philippine call center industry are for now rather dim. As a result of the combination of external and internal reasons, there are even indications that it is also more difficult to establish these unions in this high-end service sector than in the production sector. In the case of export processing zones in the Philippines, repressive regulation policies are resorted to at times to prevent unionizing (McKay, 2006). In the Philippine call centers, open repression is of no need as it is rather the formative power and the internalization of discourses of rule within individual life strategies that is preventing the establishment of unions and other collective action structures.

Having said that, the prospects collective action offers to agents are considerable: Call center agents not only have market power, they also have productive power (terms following Silver, 2005), as the industry is very vulnerable to production slow-down and in need of a quick turnaround. What they lack is organizational power which would give them even more leeway to push their interests.

But as mentioned above, call center agents are not closed to the idea of joining a union and most even consider it a better grievance mechanism in lieu of token spaces such as town hall meetings and individual complaints. But considering it trade orga-

nization in reality boils down to strategy. As one agent cum activist explains: “If you think about a union, the image that we have is that of a poorly dressed worker . . . and then you’re this someone with high heels, super attire.” The agent continues that it could be an “English-speaking union . . . but it should have a different approach, not the militant one that could possibly antagonize the agents. It should be done gradually, depending on the capacity of your mass base”. This resonates very much with the successful experiences on organizing in India, Europe, and North America (for the experience of the union UNITES, cf. Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009; Taylor et al., 2007).

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