Book Review/ Compte rendu

Woodcock, Jamie. *Working the Phones: Control and Resistance in Call Centres.* London: Pluto Press, 2017, pp. 200, $99.00 hardcover (9780745399089).

For the millions of individuals employed in call centers worldwide, work can feel like a draining, daily grind. Detailed scripts, electronic surveillance, direct supervision, and demanding targets strip autonomy from workers and apply continuous performance pressure. Demeaning treatment from supervisors, threat of termination for engaging in misbehavior, and demands for emotional labor in customer interactions present additional challenges. What is it like to work in such a place? How, when and to what end do workers engage in resistance? Why do they so seldom organize and form unions?

Jamie Woodcock seeks to answer these questions with a detailed investigation of insurance sales in a high-volume call center located in London.. Woodcock situates the project, which began as research for his doctoral dissertation, in relation to Karl Marx's account of conditions faced by nineteenth century factory workers and the struggle between capital and the working class over the limits of the working day. His more direct inspiration, however, is "Italian workerism." Rooted in twentieth-century efforts to understand the effects of Taylorism and other emerging forms of control in Italian factories, this tradition seeks to illuminate the experience of work from workers' own perspective and to reveal the basis for new forms of organization.

Drawing on data collected via six months of covert participant observation, he explains how rules, technology and supervision mire workers in a web of coercive controls and apply continuous pressure to perform. Each day began with a "buzz session" in which supervisors would review rules, emphasize quality, and play games aimed at drumming up enthusiasm among employees, who then moved to workstations, where a computer placed, recorded, and logged time spent on calls. Employees worked from scripts, supplemented by semi-scripted guides for handling pushback from potential customers. Supervisors listened in on calls, coached employees on the call-center floor, evaluated recorded calls, and provided weekly instruction on how to improve sales. A typical shift involved 300 to 400 phone calls, and workers faced constant pressure to keep going, remain alert and, when they reached a customer, to make the

sale. Unpleasant interactions were endemic to the work, and sometimes involved moral and ethical quandaries rooted in the need to press for sales while ignoring the circumstances of the person on the other end of the line.

Time spent off the phones (in training or meetings with supervisors, for example) provided little relief, owing to demeaning supervisory behavior. Supervisors used private and public training sessions not only to advise workers, but also to warn, ridicule and make an example of employees. Failure to enthusiastically take part in manufactured "fun" in these sessions could make one a target for speculation, scrutiny and ridicule. Finally, sexism and sexual harassment permeated the work environment. Sexist comments were normalized, and many workers appeared to be resigned to the presence of sexual harassment, including unwanted physical contact.

Woodcock's central argument is that despite tight controls, call center workers routinely engage in acts of resistance, most of which was geared toward avoiding time on the phones. He describes collective efforts to extend time in morning buzz sessions or other training, coordinated delays in reporting to supervisors a need to upload new leads, and smoke breaks that doubled as group venting sessions. Workers also resisted individually, by extending break times or delaying the start of work, but they had to take care to keep their methods outside the bounds of what supervisors could detect via electronic surveillance. When a computer flagged an employee's short call duration, supervisors scrutinized his work, fired him mid-shift for hanging up on workers, and called an emergency meeting in which they made an example of him in absentia.

Given low wages, unrewarding work, oppressive control and mistreatment, one might wonder why call center workers so rarely organize to demand better treatment from employers. In his attempt to organize workers at the call center where he was employed – undertaken in part to explore how "the tide of struggle could be turned" (117) – Woodcock encountered significant barriers. Beyond precarious work and a lack of trade unionism in the UK service sector, many workers were young, and lacked attachment to an organized social movement or trade union. They had little sense of how workers could demand change, or even what changes they might seek. Hostile management, surveillance and fear of termination were also factors.

There remains hope that worker resistance can be marshaled and channeled into trade unionism. Woodcock offers an account of a key informant's earlier success in organizing a different group of call center employees who mobilized around the issue of wage injustice and achieved some of their goals. Yet, high turnover was a significant barrier

to organizing and maintaining momentum. Even the key informant quit his job after being targeted repeatedly for his organization efforts, due in part to the grind of five years of employment at the call center.

Woodcock himself was fired from his job for persistent failure to meet targets. His subsequent efforts to involve other workers in reporting his findings were largely met with indifference – something that Woodcock attributed to rejection of the work more generally. He concludes by encouraging similar inquiry into other precarious, low wage jobs to explore resistance and illuminate challenges of organizing.

This book will be beneficial for individuals interested in viewing call-center work through a sociological lens. A purely academic audience may find puzzling the introductory chapter, which focuses significant attention on popular media accounts of call-center work – especially a BBC television documentary series, *The Call Centre*, and a memoir-based film, *The Wolf of Wall Street*. However, the punchy and poignant examples drawn from these sources will help undergraduates and a lay audience, especially, to engage with the book. As readers reach the authors' own findings, they will develop a keen understanding of some basic, but pivotally important concepts drawn from Marx (e.g., formal and real subordination, alienation, indeterminacy of labor value), as well as multiple foci of research on the labor process and workplace behavior (e.g., surveillance, discipline, deskilling, automation, and resistance) – making the book useful for undergraduate and graduate students aiming to grasp these concepts. Finally, findings may also be of use to scholars seeking to understand barriers to organizing workers, not only in call-centers but also in other service-sector jobs where workers labor under coercive control for little pay.

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