

# Trade Union Perceptions amongst local government call-centre workers: Challenges and Opportunities for the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU)

Babalwa Magoqwana<sup>1</sup>

Sociology Department

Rhodes University

Grahamstown

[Email: [bmagoqwana@yahoo.com](mailto:bmagoqwana@yahoo.com)]

## Abstract

Paper presented at Global Labour University Conference, Wits 28-30 September 2011

### *Abstract*

*This paper contributes to the ongoing debates about the employment and human consequences of call centre work in local government. Call centres have been adopted as a strategy to improve service delivery. However, they appear exclusivist, keeping unions at a distance. Collective action is constrained by individualisation of employment contracts and the nature of work conducted in this industry (Benner, et al, 2007) thus resulting in the unique workplace challenges of the call-centre not being attended to by the union e.g. working hours, late night transport home, workplace conditions etc. This paper focuses on call centre worker experiences and their perceptions of the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU). We suggest that SAMWU needs to engage in new strategies of mobilising call centre workers who are evidently growing in number. The choices of strategy suggested are presented in light of the on-going struggle against the marginalising nature of call centre work.*

*The paper is a product of on-going PhD research. Semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews with call centre operators, trade unions officials, shop stewards, managers and municipal officials were used to collect data. Initial findings confirm that serious problems exist in the call handling section of the South African local government in South Africa, such as, high levels of stress, high turnover, understaffing, unequal wages amongst the employees and lack of communication from all levels of the organisation.*

## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned with the ongoing debate about the employment and human consequences of the call-centre labour process within local government. It is based on research on the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan Municipality and Joburg Connect (City of Johannesburg

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<sup>1</sup> For the consideration of publication, this paper was co-authored by Sandra Matatu (PhD Sociology candidate from Rhodes University)

Metro call centre) front-line. SAMWU forms the majority union at both metropolitans. Very limited literature is available on the study of trade unions and call centres, especially in the local government sector. This paper therefore attempts to shed some light using the two metropolitans.

The paper contributes to an understanding of local government call centre labour process by drawing upon qualitative data from an ongoing PhD research. Initial findings confirm call centre concerns that serious problems exist in the call handling section of the South African local government in South Africa, such as, high levels of stress, high turnover, understaffing, unequal wages amongst the employees and lack of communication from all levels of the organisation. It is important to note that this research does not focus on consumer perceptions of call-centres but only on call-centres as a vehicle to improve customer satisfaction at local government. It presents challenges and opportunities of this new customer centred workplace for SAWMU within the local government. Also, it looks at the extent to which a unionised workforce perceives the union as an effective channel for dealing with issues central to the concerns of call centre agents.

This study involved the collection of primary qualitative data through semi-structured and in-depth face-to-face interviews with call centre operators, trade unions officials, shop stewards, managers and municipal officials. The nature of interviews was dependent on the level of my interviewee. For instance different interview questions designed for managers, supervisors and operators in order to encourage the conversation. The overarching aim of these interviews was to collect detailed data on history, objectives, development and outcomes of the call local government call centres. The interviews lasted for between 45 minutes to 1 hour 30 minutes. These semi-structured and informal interviews covered more than 38 operators focusing on individual perceptions and experiences about the call centre workplace. It is of importance to the reader to note that within this paper only those participants (18) have been quoted within the paper have been mentioned. Secondly, non-participant observation was undertaken in call centre for more than 6 weeks talking to operators, supervisors, shop stewards and managers of the call centre. The aim of the observation was to capture the dynamic and interactive nature of the call centre labour process as it took place, to explore participants' responses and gain the detailed picture of the call centre labour process. Detailed field notes were taken during and after the observation, which were immediately transcribed as soon as the researcher had time. This was to prevent any loss of information due to forgetfulness. Thirdly, Focus Group Discussions were also used in the data collection to access in greater depth the participant's responses. This was intended to stimulate group interaction and answers in some of the unclear responses from the individual interviews.

## **2. Public call centres: a product of New Public Management**

The South African call centre industry has rapidly expanded over the last decade. Within South African municipalities, call centres are a recent feature. Their introduction has been motivated by government's objective to have a more customer centric service delivery plan in compliance with the Batho Pele 'People first' framework. Since the introduction of Batho Pele, government has shifted its philosophy in public administration, giving centre stage to the customers of service delivery. New Public Management (NPM) reforms have been adopted. These are characterised by a "shift in emphasis from policy-making to management skills, from a stress on

process to output, from orderly hierarchies to an intentionally more competitive basis for providing public variable structure with more emphasis on contract provision” (Kudo, 2003:484). This shift from public administration to public management has meant the introduction of private sector business principles to public services. Performance Management Systems, for example, have become mandatory for municipalities. They are a means through which municipalities improve organisational and individual performance to enhance service delivery. They are meant to promote a performance culture and various pieces of legislation govern performance management<sup>2</sup>.

Access to information and services by the “customers” is a Batho Pele principle that is being realised through call centres. The introduction of call-centres in the public service has symbolised the beginning of customer-focused work. Their main function is said to be “the way of building a partnership and interaction between the government and community for better service delivery” (Government Digest, 2007: 15). Notably, call-centres serve a different purpose to that of customer care centres. The call-centre allows residents from “anywhere” to call in whereas the customer care centres are walk-in centres where metro services are located in different parts of the metro.

Call-centres started over 35 years ago when the travel and hospitality industries decided to centralise their reservation centres to cope with growing consumer demand. Today, they are the norm in retailing, telecommunication, entertainment and travel industries and the public sector (Taylor, 1998: 89). Inbound call-centres are the dominant type of the call-centre in South Africa. Within most municipalities, call-centres are designed to answer queries from the citizens about accounts, water bills, emergency services, natural disasters, service cut-offs, etc using an Automatic Call Distributor (ACD). The ACD distributes calls to the available agents or puts the calls in a queue so the caller will get a message that tells him/her to hold for the next available consultant. Calls are processed by means of an interactive voice recorder (IVR) which prompts the customer to choose from a list of options e.g. press 1 for accounts, 2 for life threatening emergency etc. Complaints and enquiries are processed by using instant access to customer data from computers. Telephone operators are managed in teams with each team assigned to a particular supervisor and compensated according to their performance i.e. reaching targets (Omar, 2005: 267).

Call-centres have been labelled as “new sweatshops of the service economy” or white-collar factories”, driven by standardisation and rationalisation (Knights and McCabe, 2003; Fernie and Metcalfe in Omar, 2005). On the other hand, the advantages of call-centres are that they reduce large volumes of enquiries, travelling costs and distance for citizens, queuing, and the time spent in face-to-face customer interaction. Public call-centres seem to be established mostly to improve customer satisfaction levels rather than as a means of reducing costs.

Taylor et al (2002) argue that ... in defining the distinctions of call centres. They argue that not all call-centres are monotonous and deskilling. Some, are based on a quality service initiative which stresses employee discretion in decision-making. Service quality varies across the

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<sup>2</sup> Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000, Municipal Planning and Performance Management Regulations 2000, Municipal Finance Act 53 of 2003 and Municipal Performance Regulations for municipal managers and managers directly accountable to municipal managers 2006.

industry, depending on the size, the sector, the nature of functions, etc. Typically, call-centres are associated with bad customer service (Blunden, 2003). Also, workers are increasingly treated as “human robots” in these ‘McJobs’ (Korczynski, 1995: 79). Some have portrayed the contemporary service work as fake, invasive, demeaning and highly routinised (Korczynski, 1995: 80). This leads, more and more, to the individual and group sense of self of service workers being taken over by the company. As emotional labour, this means having a “friendly tone of voice, displaying empathy with customers and remaining calm and courteous even when customers are abusive” (Omar, 2005: 272).

Front-line workers experience “emotional alienation” since they are required to hide their unpleasant emotions and put the customer first (Taylor, 1997). As *Batho Pele* puts it, the public needs “not just a smile but to put oneself in the shoes of the customer” (*Batho Pele* booklet, 2000). Regarding the physical experience of call-centre work, repetitive strain injury, sleeplessness, voice loss and hearing problems are common. In addition low pay, close supervision, surveillance, monotonous work, boredom and unsociable hours are common (Richardson, Belt and Marshal, 2000: 363). Some scholars have noted high turnover and employee absenteeism in call-centres as coping or resistance strategies against these ‘dehumanising’ working conditions (Mulholland, 2004; Scott, 1985).

In observing the labour process of call centre work, many authors have referred to it as ‘deskilling’ what was ‘a complex set of tasks’. Call-centre workers appear to lack contextual knowledge (Taylor, 1998; Taylor and Tyler, 2002; Appelbaum and Albin, 1989) when completing work tasks. This increases the view that these workers know little, thus increasing the telephone agents’ stress. The algorithmic form of organisation (pre-programmed rules of decision-making that routine data entry) requires no knowledge of the firm’s business lines and products, only basic computer skills and language proficiency (Appelbaum and Albin, 1989: 252). Customers that hold this perception are likely not to want to deal with a call-centre because of presumed poor customer service. Whether it is a public or a private call-centre, consumers complaints about bad service received in call-centres forms a challenge to call-centre workers.

### **3. Union reactions to call centres**

Trade unions on the other hand have been criticised by workers for lack of responsiveness to their needs, lack of internal democracy and dialogue (Nichols and Sudur, 2005: 45). Workers seem to complain about range of issues from lack of union visibility, communication, lack of consultations, lack of democracy and too much interaction with management not representing them. One of the effects of individualistic nature of work is that workers have accepted the need for emotional labour whereby customer first principle takes precedence (Danford, et al, 2003: 6). This signifies the triumph of the customer culture shift where workers now work together to reach the goals of the employer which is customer satisfaction. One the noticeable aspects of the changing nature of work is that it sometimes goes hand in hand with a description of deterioration labour, quality circles and group work and new forms of employment relations (Stewart, 2005: 4). Some have struggled in understanding the contradictions between the rise in management control and increased worker intensity whilst there is a decline in union power (Danford et al, 2003: 7).

Call centres constitute a unique working environment in which distinctive form of work contributes to experience of task performance and stress. Though they vary according to quantitative and qualitative features the balance of evidence is also true that they are repetitive, value-driven and may lead to stress and emotional exhaustion. Bain (et al, 2004: 70) argues that call centre workforces pose a threat for union organisation as the jobs are individualistic, occupied by youthful staff within call centres and the...

People join unions for a variety of reasons including the pressure of targets, and then absentee procedures, the shifts, flexibility foe management and non-flexibility for staff, issues relating to women including maternity leave, time off (Bain, 2004: 71). One of the major reasons they join union is the need for protection “insurance against the unknown” There are three issues that unions can start dealing with when addressing call centre unique conditions including management control on time pressures, employee training and shift work. Call centre workers discontent suggest that their existence is a matter of importance to unions as they aspire to bridge the representational gap (Bain, et al. 2004: 71).

Challenges and opportunities for call-centre unionism range from substantive call-centre issues (unionise identifying the developing bargaining agendas which identify, address and prioritise matters of greatest concerns among call-centre employees), organisational barriers confronting unions, (individualistic nature of the job, employees ability to leave workstations or interact amongst themselves) to the youthful nature of call-centre staff imbued with anti-unionism or individualistic attitudes.

According to Benner et al. (2007) unionised call-centres in SA tend to pay more and offer better working conditions. Non-unionised call-centres earn 4,5% less than unionised call-centres. Autonomy and training are also more available at the call-centres with unions in the SA call-centre. Although workers may have more control over their job tasks, they tend to be less productive than the non-unionised call-centres. At Johannesburg and Nelson Mandela Metro organisational and structural transformation has led to shifts from the help desks to fully fledged call centres. In the late 1990s SA local government saw a reduction in the financial support from the national treasury by 50%. The discourse of NPM took its toll as the municipalities were pressured to commit to heavy cost recovery programmes. Citizens were now ‘encouraged’ through electricity cut offs and water cut offs to pay bills if they were not complying with these cost recovery changes. In the Nelson Mandela Metro, call centres were introduced as part of the centralisation of access and electronic governance strategy, while the City of Johannesburg (COJ) developed them through their Igoli 2002 project.

## **4. Call centre background, Work organisation and labour process**

### **4.1 Joburg Connect**

COJ came into being after the merger of 13 local municipalities in 1998. It forms the epicentre of the South African financial, business and information services in the country. It is the biggest Metropolitan municipality in terms of population and contribution to GDP. After the merger, the Metropolitan council experienced a fiscal crisis, which led to the introduction of Igoli 2002 transformation policy. The main objective of this model was to decentralise and encourage institutional autonomy this meant the creation of Utilities, Agencies and Corporatized entities

(UAC). Part of the transformation included the creation of centralised access to the Metro, reducing the list of numbers that the customer had to dial in order to get assistance. In 2001, the then Mayor Amos Masondo launched the “One Number, One City, One Vision” campaign and thus opening up Joburg Connect at Proton House.

Like many public call centres this call centre started as a helpdesk with each department having its own help desk assistant. From less than 8 operators to more than 120 workers, Joburg Connect has grown to be one of the gigantic call centres found in the local government. Joburg Connect is the City’s contact centre for all city enquiries and complaints. It operates around the clock, seven days a week and 365 days a year. Joburg Connect main purpose is the centralisation of service access for customers and to reduce the list of numbers that each customer would have to go through before being assisted. This call centre is divided into two: Emergency Connect and Care Connect. Emergency Connect operators receive life threatening emergency calls and dispatch response vehicles like ambulance, police, fire engines and rescue vehicles. Care Connect deals with all general enquiries regarding the municipal services. The operators here answer calls from customers enquiring about accounts, water and electricity, street lights, Pikitup, metro bus, etc. The research was primarily based on Care Connect.

Joburg Connect attends to telephonic queries and complaints in a standard and quick fashion but the difficulties of linking the back office and call centre seem to have hindered this process. It was envisioned that the call centre would improve customer satisfaction and ultimately change the bad perceptions by the customers. Thus, call centre information would be fed to the municipality business planning processes by quantifying the number of complaints about a certain subject, to result in a more ‘responsive’ municipality. Unfortunately it has not been possible for the municipality to measure and quantify the kind of complaints about their services.

Running parallel services to Joburg Connect are other utilities contact centres, i.e. Joburg Water, City Power, Joburg Metro Police Department, etc. These proved to be a challenge from the inception as these call centres are not linked. Since customers are shared between the city and these UACs, confusion amongst call operators, for instance, as to whether the query belonged to Joburg Water or City call centre has been characteristic. All of these call centres are not situated under same roof though they use the same IVR number in connecting all calls.

Care Connect office plan structures are open space with over 120 workstations and 5 supervisor stations. Most of call-centre operators are female (60%) from age 18-30. Many are young and just out of school. Usually, public call centres are staffed by the civil servants who have been employed for longer than 10 years due to experience within the municipality . The main criteria to get into a call-centre job are a Matric certificate, good communication skills, customer focus, computer literacy, call centre experience (with Basic Ambulance Certificate in the emergence services BAC). Joburg Connect deals with 24 000 calls per day which means one operator spends less than three minutes in each call. In the day shift there are 96 workers whereas in the night shift there are less than 20 operators. The call centre takes plus minus 90 000 call per month, with call avoidance up to 50% at times. Operators typically work 12 hour shifts with the night shift having fewer numbers of operators than the day shift.

## **4.2 Nelson Mandela Metro call centre**

Situated in the impoverished province of the Eastern Cape, the Nelson Mandela Bay Metropolitan Municipality (NMBMM), formerly known as Port Elizabeth Municipality, consists of Port Elizabeth (PE) city, Uitenhage and Despatch. The area has a population of approximately 1,1 million residents and was established in 2001 through the incorporation of PE with Despatch, Uitenhage and surrounding townships. It is the fifth largest of SA's eight Metropolitan cities and is the dominant Metro in the Eastern Cape. The Metro introduced call centres as a service delivery mechanism. Like private sector call centre operators, work at these call centres is characterised by fragmented, highly routinised, closely monitored, predominantly female and stressful. Municipal call-centre workers take calls from customers about general enquiries, complaints, electricity, water disconnections or reconnections, and account balances, on water and electricity.

The collection of amounts owed to municipalities for property rates and service charges has been a significant challenge facing all municipalities including the Mandela Metro. The total outstanding debt owed by the citizens of the Metro account for R1,164 billion (NMM, undated). In his address before the implementation of the customer care by-law in July 2003, the metro's Chief Financial Officer, Mr Odayer, saw the link between improved customer care, cash collection and long term service delivery (Odayer, 2003). After the municipality was criticised for lacking the proper credit control strategy, NMM had to show evidence of debt collection and negotiating strategies (Tsatsire, 2001). Operating under the department of Budget and Treasury Office an "Interactive Voice Technology" system was set up in 2001 as one of the main strategies to encourage the culture of payment. One of the key responsibilities of Budget and Treasury office is to "implement credit control policy and effective and efficient debt collection mechanisms as required by the municipal manager" (Council Minutes June 2001: 22).

This very controversial system interactive voice response (IVR) was finally set up in April 2001 by Unihold Business Solutions (Pty.) Limited and later merged by Siemens Business Limited (Pty.) The IVR system was set up to enable members of the public to contact NMMM telephonically for the purpose of obtaining information and to pay accounts. This IVR system was never designed for customer care but for account payments and credit collection. The Budget and Treasury Office call centre will be referred to as call centre A. A Municipality manager commented "That call-centre is only linked to payment not to the holistic needs or services of the municipality" (Top Manager 1 NMM - Tsatsire). The history of the IVR system, which was only changed in principle into a call-centre, helps to explain the nature of work conducted in this call-centre.

## **5. Working in the local government call centre**

Using Joburg Connect and call centre A (NMM), work experiences are now presented.

Two main forms of technology are used at both call-centres: Interactive Voice Response (IVR) and Automatic Call Distribution (ACD). This technology allows the municipality to measure how many times the phone rings before being answered, how many calls are answered, who is on the phone, who is not, and how long each agent took on each call.

At NMBMM, the call-centre is mainly a workplace for black women over the age of 40, although there are two black male agents, one coloured male, one coloured female and one white

female. All the call centre agents had been working for call centre A for over 12 years. The average level of education was Matric. They managed calls about general enquiries, complaints, electricity, water disconnections or reconnections, and account balances, on water and electricity. Each call-centre agent receives on average 80 calls per shift. Call-centre performance is not measured by the number of calls answered, but they have to answer all calls. Calls are sent to the next available operator, they either push the button manually or the call may be pushed automatically. There is no set criterion for recruitment, as long as candidates have knowledge of the job. Customer care front-line workers are regularly rotated around call centre A.

“There has to be some form of recruitment strategy...focusing on customer care personality and telephone etiquette...but none of that is happening at the moment” (NMM, Top Manager 1.)

Call centre workers expressed frustration about their working conditions. At the beginning of an interview one worker said

“yhu! finally there is someone that can listen to us...you know what when I hear people on newspapers crashing us for not answering the calls I get very angry because no one knows what we go through hear...you know what Choma (my friend) I always want to call even on these radio programmes and tell them exactly what’s happening...they think that we supposed to resolve queries, but this is done at Thuso House in Braamfontein our back office.” (JC- CCA 1)

The Municipal System Act (2002) stipulates that local municipality should treat their residents as consumers. Chapter 6 of the Municipal System Act (2002) states that “municipality must facilitate a culture of public service and accountability amongst staff... give members of the local municipality full and accurate information about the level and standard of the municipal services they are entitled to receive”. As this has been fully described earlier both Metros have created these call centres, to reduce the queues and promote efficiency in terms of time spend between the customer and the frontline. A common perception is that public call centres should provide a fairer working environment, with high quality jobs compared to the private sector call centres (Bain, et al, 2005: 5). This line of thought is challenged by the evidence provided in the following picture of both Joburg Connect and Nelson Mandela Metro call centres.

### *Stressful work conditions*

Both Joburg Connect and call centre A workers expressed feeling much stress. This was due to the continuing shortage of staff in both call centres. For example, Joburg Connect has been experiencing a high turnover and some of the terminated contracts were not immediately replaced because of financial difficulties.

The whole municipality is a mess; we are currently operating on less than 60% capacity...because the municipality refuses to replace those budgeted vacancies (JC, Top Manager 1)

This was echoed by other managers and agents within the Joburg Connect call centre and was also observed during visits to the call centre. At call centre A, the experience was different. It



operated at almost full capacity with usually 20 call centre operators in the revenue section and a few open spaces waiting to be filled. The manager of call centre A explained

We usually call on our casuals during the peak periods...as the call centre gets busy around pay days and during natural disasters...(NMM: Supervisor 1)

Understaffing was a major challenge within these call centres as well as high absenteeism of the agents due to high sick leave tendency.

The latter in both municipal call centres proved to be a tactic that operators used to ease the pressure and stress on their part. Most of them admitted that they take sick leave not because they are sick but the work is too stressful.

...People who take leave outnumber the ones at work, some maybe are lazy but most are bored it's not nice to come to work and call centre work is stressful (JC, CCA 2)

This in part is the result of the poor communication within the organisation. Working conditions have worsened due to service delivery expectations from these councils. Local government call-centres, though (relatively) small and unionised, are stressful to the operators, because they are not seen as call handlers but the 'face of inefficient service delivery'. The abuse from irate customers is not based only on 'bad customer service' but is also about service delivery itself. This is made worse by the lack of communication between the back-office and the call-centre. Call-centre workers have to answer for things that they are not informed about, and so they sound 'inefficient' to members of the public.

One worker seemed to have accepted these relations with customers, saying, "Threats and angry customers are part of our job." Having to deal with irritated customers and protect the council's decisions makes this job stressful for workers. Call-centre workers become associated with the public sector as a whole, not only the municipality.

All the workers in the Metro call-centre termed these insults and abuse from the public as racist as they were accused of inefficiency and blamed for the national government's faults. One agent quoting the customer says "All of you Thabo Mbeki government people you don't know what you are doing there...you are so incompetent"

It is clear from my research that call-centre workers are 'not just answering the phone', they have become "fire extinguishers" or "shock-absorbers" who have to harmonise the relationship between the customer and the council. As customers call the municipality angrily looking for answers and irritated about services, they are met with a smile and a voice that has to assure them that "all is going to be well". Due to an inefficient billing system and Eskom power problems, these workers bear the brunt and have to be "spokespersons" for the Metro.

This was evident when Eskom increased tariffs by 30%. Call-centre operators in the Buffalo City Municipality had to answer for both municipality and Eskom, which ended up not answering the calls. This was worsened by the lack of communication between the back office and front-line workers: "When the council makes a decision that is very unpopular we get more frustrated callers of which we understand but it's not our fault."

Besides being called names, call-centre operators identified the lack of appreciation and recognition as demoralising factors. Ear problems are common among call centre workers due to noise and type of headphones used.

In one of the call-centres, workers identified managerial control, strict supervision and racist customers as the major causes of stress in their job. The majority of operators mentioned one of the causes of stress as being 'politics' amongst themselves. The infighting was explained by many as being the 'girls only' environment, whilst others generally thought it was personality clashes.

Workers' voice and accent was one of the key contributing factors in stress experienced by call-centre operators. Operators identified their accent as the source of attack and abuse by customers who immediately accuse them of incompetence. "When they listen to your name and accent then you get it"

This was also highlighted by the Nelson Mandela Metro customer care manager who argued for voice training and telephone etiquette for workers. One of the operators explained that when she complained about the lack of training

you know us hey... from disadvantaged education background when you get here and deal with English and Afrikaans speaking customers you tend to be intimidated and not want to answer the calls (NMM, CCA 2)

#### *Lack of training*

There is no set criterion for recruitment, as long as candidates have knowledge of the job. Most of the managers seemed to think that age was a big problem with call-centre operators, as they had worked in the "old culture of the organisation" which posed a challenge to the now "customer-oriented" municipality. A top manager in the Nelson Mandela Metro stated,

The biggest challenge is changing the attitudes of the employees towards this new customer oriented approach... it is easy to deal with new recruits but the old staff has to be re-trained and it is hard to re-train those people (NMM, Top Manager 2).

One of the most common and effective ways of changing attitudes and culture of an organisation is extensive training and development. Mostly managers were trained in the new customer care approach and they were not the ones who sat at the front desk dealing with customers every day. In the Mandela Metro, Top management showed awareness and understanding of the concepts of Batho Pele but this did not filter down to the bottom. This lack of training was displayed by workers in call centre A who had no idea what Batho Pele meant. This was evident when one of the call-centre workers looked lost saying, "Is that something on TV or newspapers...what is that Batho Pele I have no idea what it is."

On the other hand Joburg Connect proved to be more knowledgeable about the Batho Pele principles but complained that their training was not enough. This stemmed from the current water and electricity inaccurate billing software crisis, which has become the source of pain and dissatisfaction to both the customer and the operators.

The impact of billing is basically call volumes that have sky rocketed because of incorrect bills. This has frustrated the staff members which results from a frustrated customer, this saw a backlog in our calls and increased abandonment rate. Response times have tended to be longer (JC-Top Manager 2).

Acknowledged by the managers, the inaccurate statement given to the customers have worsened the working conditions in the call centre and further increases the turnover. This is not only prevalent in the Joburg Metro, as the billing system is linked directly to what the call centre operators do. The customers are infuriated by the inaccuracy in the statement or get electricity cut off which makes them turn to the first person they face representing the municipality and insult them.

### *Communication*

Though managers seek total control of workers there is still a space for resistance by employees in the absence of supervision. Dropping the irate customer, or putting it on loudspeaker and letting the customer talk unattended or 'working to rule' thus restricting the information and friendliness given to customers are the most common forms of resistance. At call centre A, call centre operators would let the calls ring unattended at times because they lacked answers. This is the result of the poor communication between different departments of the municipalities and/or communications department.

front-line office should work well with back-office but there is lack of communication between the two which makes call-centre work very difficult...people work in silos here (NMM, Top Manager – 3).

This was observed in a situation where the electricity department Director himself was on a radio programme the night before I visited the call-centre. He was addressing a nation-wide but Port Elizabeth based radio station about Electricity, and he apparently gave the call-centre number for more enquiries. This was not about electricity faults but about service delivery from people outside the Metro, calling about their lack of access to electricity. After answering one of these calls, looking lost and shocked at the same time the supervisor was so embarrassed when she did not know about this: "when did Mr ....(his name) go to this station? How come he never told us about this (shaking her head)?" (NMM, Supervisor-2)

Joburg Connect have gone as far as saying, "customers teach us lots of things that are not communicated to us by the management". The poor communication forms one of the sources of frustration and pressure in the call centre environment as they are working with the dispersal of information.

You know what is happening in the call centre, the customer teaches you lots of things. You then pretend as if you know because you are trying to cover up for the municipality, and then you run to the supervisor who knows nothing as well because there is no communication between the supervisors and the managers (JC-CCA 3).

Communication should be prioritised in a call centre environment to avoid the irate customers and also safe guard the operators from the. The latter then get insulted on their lack of knowledge and being pure message takers who can never assist in anything. The most

interesting part was not only the poor communication in the organisation, this was also reported to be the case with the Union representatives who supposed to inform and protect these call centre operators. Some of the operators felt isolated and sometimes compromised by their union. In both these call centres, South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) is the majority union who represent most of these operators.

## **6. SAMWU's position within call centres**

SAMWU was formed in 1987 and has become one of the strongest public sector unions in South Africa. After the African National Congress (ANC) Government took over in 1994, a string of local government restructuring policies along conservative neoliberal lines were introduced. This meant a reduction in National government grants and fiscal control of the local government which saw many councils transferring their service to private utilities. The privatisation process rapidly caused the coalition between SAMWU and many city councils including Johannesburg. SAMWU led many protests against privatisation and maintains an objective of opposing privatisation and fighting for the direct provision of all basic necessities of life by the state.

The new customer centred workplace within local government seem to present new mobilisation challenges and opportunities

In their response to the customer driven ethos of the local government, a SAMWU representative recognised the impact on the working conditions and the citizens in general by saying

Customerisation worsens the working conditions of municipal workers because they now seek to maximise profit with less workers to increase revenue and impressive fiscal policies. For example we've got this case now here [showing me a document about the working hours and conditions in the local government] library workers are now required to work on Saturdays as well and given that day during the week without pay. This was done without consultation with the union but we oppose that. Workers are suppose to be given a choice whether to work on a weekend or not and paid for the overtime they worked. This business rule of more with fewer workers is wrong (SAMWU EC Official 1)).

With the noticeable deteriorating employment conditions of the formerly 'secured and fair employer' SAMWU needs to move beyond the bread and butter issues and pay attention to this growing number of 'white collar proletariat' within their jurisdiction. The above scenario was confirmed by a call-centre operator in the Electricity call-centre when she said

We work Monday to Monday and sometimes get the day off during the week, when you start questioning this they just say read the contract (NMM, CCA 1).

Both the City of Johannesburg and NMBM fall under the South African Local Government Association (SALGA) bargaining council which means that their wages are determined at a national level and call centre workers would not be treated differently to other SAMWU members. This has resulted in a situation where workplace challenges of the call-centre not being attended to by the union e.g. working hours, late night transport home, workplace conditions etc. SAMWU members within the call centres expressed negative sentiment about

SAMWU. They felt isolated and neglected as the union was not visible within the call centre. Only one call-centre operator was unable to attend SAMWU meetings in the Nelson Mandela Metro call-centre, because of time constraints and the nature of the job.

When asked about the role of call-centres in the Metro for service delivery, the SAMWU organiser seemed to taking more of the customer sympathetic view:

We are trying to compete with the first world, in South Africa most people are poor and need government support...Government institutions are now transformed from being service providers to service authorities...In SA people cannot afford R10.00 prepaid electricity, how do you expect these people to call a call-centre and wait for a long time without money? Call-centres are a convenience for the rich and a nightmare for the poor...How can you become a customer still struggling for the basic needs? Water is not a luxury it's a necessity (SAMWU EC Official 1).

In the Johannesburg branch, one SAMWU official went further to say:

Call centres are just message takers who cannot help you or provide any feedback. They are just glorified PA's of other departments, there is no link between call centres and the other municipal entities (SAMWU GP, Official 2).

These two speakers point to the 'useless' nature of these call centres, not only to the public but also to the workers themselves, as they lack any capacity to be of assistance to the public. Call centres are also proving to be a difficult and new form of work which does not fit in with SAMWU's 'normal' members. This was also noted by the high profile official of this union

This section of workers have been largely ignored the reason being they don't exist in every municipality, they are treated as the frontline desks or receptions but the only difference is that they are specialised in dealing with telephone enquiries (SAMWU GP, Official 4).

### **6.1 Low union participation and collective action**

According to Omar (SASA Presentation 2008) it is very difficult for call-centre workers to strike due to "individualised" nature of the job. Collective action is constrained by individualisation of employment contracts and the nature of work conducted (Benner, et al, 2007). Although this was attempted by call-centre workers from Telkom in one of their call-centres, and thus the calls were redirected to another call-centre within Telkom. This is a disadvantage for the call-centre industry as the impact of a strike can be easily avoided (Omar, 2008).

We do strike but only during lunch time and picket but we cannot leave our workstation as this is considered as the emergency services (NMM, CCA 3).

In Joburg Connect workers managed to participate in a strike organised by SAMWU in October 2007 though leaving call-centre operating with 50% of the staff.

Though Webster and Omar (2003: 22) saw a threat to collective bargaining by the individualising nature of performance management and reward systems at Telkom, this is different in the local government, as operators have a standard or fixed wage and not a performance-based wage.

Though call-centres have been introduced in both Metros to improve customer satisfaction, the difficulties for workers that the unions highlight raises questions about how efficient such workers would be. Most of the workers interviewed identified 'loyalty' and protection from losing their jobs as the major reasons behind joining the union. Other than these two union was deemed invisible in the call centres. Though many wanted to participate in the union activities but the nature of job and time constraints affected their participation. One of them even suggested that

if meetings were during the time where all of us can make it I'm sure we will be able to participate...but in our job it is impossible for all of us to attend even to picket when there is a strike because we are more like essential service...if we go picketing we'll have to go during lunchtime and get back to work... (NMM, CCA-3)

The union needs to deal with call-centre issues differently because of workers' unique working conditions. SAMWU needs to pay more attention to issues relating to women such as maternity leave, shift work, transport home from late night shift, and management time control which leads to stress, and the need for training to deal with stress.

Greater SAMWU visibility in call-centres would also assist in building trust amongst membership as some termed their shop stewards "shop stupid" because of their perceived ineffectiveness.

## **6.2 Limited union representivity**

In the mist of local government reforms, SAMWU finds it difficult to include this section of workers, because not all municipalities have the call centres.

This section of workers have been largely ignored the reason being they don't exist in every municipality, they are treated as the frontline desks or receptions but the only difference is that they are specialised in dealing with telephone enquiries (SAMWU GP, Official 2).

This was the statement by the President of the union when trying to explain the new customer centred workplace in the local government. Accepting that this section of workers has never been part of the bigger union mandate as this union historically organised the blue collar workers within the municipality. Though there is an obvious increase in the number of call centres within the local government, SAMWU still lacks the strategies in order to capture the unique needs of this new form of work they organise.

Maybe this is the start of the conversation about this section of workers, we need to set up a national approach and put it in our agenda even in the bargaining council, they are unique section of workers within SAMWU. Maybe they have been overlooked nothing has been done much by the union (SAMWU GP, Official 1).

The union is facing number of challenges with regards to the reforms in the local government as it was at the forefront in opposing the implementation of Igoli 2002. The poor relations between the union and the managers of the utilities were at the forefront. This was followed by the lack of clarity in jurisdiction to organise within these utilities in the local government, for

example SATAWU (South African Transport and Allied Workers Unions) also seeks to recruit the bus drivers in the local government though they supposed to belong within SAMWU boundaries.

SATAWU and SAMWU...though we are under COSATU these unclear jurisdictions affect the strength of union organisations as we now fight for members ourselves...we have a court case tomorrow directly linking to this issue..

On the other hand, Communication Workers Union (CWU) organises the workers in this communication industry, but because these call centres are under local government they are now under SAMWU. One of the top SAMWU officials said to be very confident of the SAMWU presence in the local government arguing against threat of other unions.

SATAWU and CWU can never take over from our jurisdiction because each union has its own constitution stipulation exactly where it will start in terms of the jurisdiction... For example there are police in local government but that is POPCRU's territory we can't go just because they are on local government... The scope for each union is defined whether public/private, call centre is the function of local government so they will need to prove a demarcation dispute at the CCMA to prove that it is their jurisdiction (SAMWU GP, Official 1).

This adds to the labour relations challenges within these different call centres. It is argued that the Utilities (Joburg Water, City Power, JMPD, Pik-it-up, etc) call centres pay more and have better working conditions than the City call centre (Joburg Connect). This has resulted in many call centres refusing to be absorbed to the City call centre. During this period of my visit there was a strike in other call centres as they refused to be integrated to the city call centres, arguing for the bad working conditions. This is the result of the "privatised nature" of these utilities compared to the city operations.

The major challenges as I have mentioned its salaries, the city pays less than these utilities, and the terms of employment and conditions of work are completely different for example they enjoy the 14<sup>th</sup> check and paid maternity leave, but the union can't do anything at this level such things need to be addressed at the national bargaining council (SAMWU GP, Official 3)

This was also confirmed by JC agents arguing for the career opportunities in the utilities which is different in the City cal centre. It was clear that the agents here envied the utilities agents, as they enjoyed more benefits and more pay than them.

The entities employees get paid more than the city employees, there is growth there not more than two years in call centre, here there are people who have been here since it started and they will say the old staff does not want to work...managers of those entities open up doors for them and recommend their staff members (JC, CCA 3).

The uniqueness of call centre challenges to the rest of SAMWU workers makes the operators feel isolated from the organisation. "Workers from this section can feel like isolated remember, historically SAMWU organised the blue collar mass black workers" (SAMWU SG, Gauteng). This

formed another set of challenges of the unions with regards to organising the “white collar worker” in the local government. Organising this set of workers requires a certain level of skill and capabilities which cannot always be available within the pool of shop-stewards that the unions has. The SAMWU official admitted that their shop Stewards might be intimidated by the awareness of this segment of workers which would create a tension during the representation process when needed. “For example we tend to prioritise the cases of the senior managers because we don’t want that member to undermine the representation” (SAMWU GP, Official 2).

## **7. Emerging mobilisation opportunities within new customer centred workplaces**

Regarding working hours and conditions, SAMWU could further engage the municipality over securing better working conditions for call centre workers. Health and safety problems tend to be associated with this kind of work (Taylor, Bain, Baldry and Ellis, 2003). These issues can be raised with the employer by SAMWU. Given the proportion of women workers within the call centres, raising issues in a gender-sensitive manner will ensure the needs of all workers are catered for.

As call centre workers are typically under atypical employment contracts and prone to remain in a ‘dead-end’ career position, SAMWU could insist on training and development plans for these workers. While the workers at call centre A did not have short term contracts this was rather peculiar to the employment arrangements typically found amongst call centre workers. SAMWU has an opportunity to champion career development for workers and to be at the forefront of helping minimise the negative effects of contract condition changes which affect these workers. One also needs to acknowledge SAMWU’s initiative in pushing the Joburg Metro in absorbing the contract workers into permanent jobs in 2007. This is the start in also increasing the number of members of the union.

The atypical contracts call centre workers are in make them vulnerable to poor wages. When wage issues are pursued by the union this category of worker’s needs need to be included. In the Joburg Metro, it was apparent that call centre operators from the utilities refused to be part of the Joburg city call centre due to better working conditions and wages. This needs to be levelled as all these operators are under one union; this will increase a sense of unity amongst these SAMWU members in the same job.

Electronic surveillance is used to monitor performance. This monitoring borders on invasiveness. The managerial concern with monitoring is performance but this could also be seen as an anti-union strategy by management. Workers are fearful to lose their jobs hence a possible reluctance to join SAMWU and participate in union activities. While the introduction of technologies to the workplace remains largely a managerial prerogative, this does not have mean a total exclusion of the union in discussions to manage change processes. SAMWU could participate in discussions on managing the change processes which if not handled well could lead to negative experiences by workers.

Call centre workers are not easily accessible to the union. The strict working hours make it difficult for workers to attend union meetings. SAMWU should improve and extend its communication channels between these workers and union representatives. Call centre worker



concerns need to be better integrated into the demands by the union and therefore good communication channels need to exist. SAMWU needs to initiate well-organised campaigns to attract call centre workers. Call centre workers with low expectations of the union may have their perceptions changed if the union makes itself accessible and provides information of worker rights and benefits through the union.

These call centre workers are resulting in further fragmentation of the workforce (and working class). Union organisers need to recognise this and secure wages and benefits for all groups of their membership as far as possible. This could help improve their image as these workers would feel less alienated from other SAMWU members.

Many call centre workers exhibited a negative image of SAMWU representatives calling them “shop-stupids”. The union should work on its present image by conveying a message relevant to the needs of the call centre workers. They need to show these workers that they are able to address their major concerns e.g. on disciplinary processes, consultation (especially over levels of monitoring), job security, training and job opportunities.

“SAMWU’s challenge in representing the changing municipal workforce” was also noted by Bachiesi (2007: 71). Many have confirmed the growing representation of managers within the union poses a threat in their resources. The continuous increase in defending the managers who are also sometimes representatives of the employer makes SAMWU compromise some of its members at times. This was also apparent in Joburg Municipality when Programme Phakama was implemented with labour unions against it but because of their affiliation and relations to the political leadership of the municipality, they had to keep quiet.

Workers during the ongoing billing crisis felt so comprised by their leadership and they never opposed the implementation of the Programme Phakama. “SAMWU has neglected its duties, unions want to retain members and not to expose them. Nepotism, bedroom promotions, is all part of the frustration here...” (JC, CCA 5). This feeling of being compromised for the union’s political gains further spreads these negative sentiments from the rank and file.

## **8. Conclusion**

The study has illuminated the need for SAMWU to rethink some of its strategies of mobilisation and protection of call centre worker rights across municipalities. The trend to introduce technological innovations and call centres is likely to expand, further restructuring and reorganising work and management practices at municipalities. The complexities associated with call centre work cannot be overlooked by unions. Unions like SAMWU will need to engage with present and future developments to protect and mobilise diverse workers. The poor working conditions experienced by young call centre workers could also be an opportunity to attract the younger generation who seem to be dwindling in numbers across unions.

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**List of Interviewees (in pseudo names)**

**Nelson Mandela Metro (NMM) Municipality**

NMM Top Manager 1, Thamsanqa

NMM Top Manager 2, Andile

NMM Top Manager 3, Ondela

NMM Supervisor 1, Jennifer

NMM Supervisor 2, Ngwane

SAMWU EC Official 1, Chumile

SAMWU EC Official 2, Mphumzi

NMM CCA 1, Kago

NMM CCA2, Carol

NMM CCA 3, Rhonda

**Joburg City (JC) Municipality**

JC Top Manager 1, Felicia

JC Top Manager 2, Amandla

JC CCA 1, Kromotso

JC CCA 2, Kholiswa

JC CCA 3, Thuli

SAMWU GP Official 1, Denson

SAMWU GP Official 2, Mahlubi

SAMWU GP Official 3, Vusumzi

SAMWU GP Official 4, Petros