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Spotlight interview with Laïla Nassimi (Morocco - CDT)

Morocco's first unionised call centre

Brussels, 30 July 2008 (ITUC OnLine): The number of call centres in Morocco is constantly on the rise. The young, qualified workers they employ face high levels of stress and contempt for their cultural identity. Speaking out against the investors exploiting the flaws in Morocco's labour legislation, Laila Nassimi wants to see more contact between trade unions around the world and appeals for international solidarity in the fight for decent work in the globalised call centre industry.

How did you start out in the call centre sector?

I started working in the sector at the age of 15. I was studying at the same time and managed to build up a good customer base for myself working for a French market research firm. I'm now 46 years old and work for Sitel Maroc, which has three sites in Morocco, two in Casablanca and one in Rabat, employing 1500 people in total. Sitel Maroc is linked to Sitel France, which is part of the U.S. multinational Sitel. We work for customers such as HP, Orange, Wanadoo and a number of big French insurance, fiduciary advice and telesales companies.

I have also experienced working in a call centre that sold scam products. It was run by the type of French investor that turns up here with a single contract, opens a call centre platform and employs people on fixed-term, part-time contracts. You have to sell all kinds of rubbish... and afterwards it's the Moroccans who are said to be swindlers! It is our country's image that's at stake. I soon left that job, I couldn't stand it, it makes you feel immoral. There are 300 call centres in Casablanca; they are sprouting like mushrooms. The problem is the investors' motives: they want to exploit the flaws in Morocco's labour legislation. Many of them are also taking advantage of the 100% tax break for the first five years and the 50% exemption for the five years following that.

What is the typical profile of a call centre employee?

Sitel Maroc generally employs young men and women aged between 20 and 25, for whom this is their first job, and who are often highly qualified (having completed at least 2 to 3 years of higher education). It is the "cream" of our youth. They are paid a starting wage of 3500 dirhams (around €350) a month. That may seem like a lot on the Moroccan market, but it's nothing compared with the profitability of the services offered. At least DH 6000 would have to be paid if anyone were to consider doing this job long term, especially given the health hazards and the costs they imply.

The first call centres that set up here were expecting to pay a minimum wage of about 7000 dirhams (approx. €700), but Moroccan employers campaigned for

it to be brought down to between 3500 and 6000 dirhams at the most. The young people working in the sector have no experience and are afraid of losing their jobs, so they agree to anything. Many of them only leave when they are really burnt out. Most of them suffer in silence; they have taken out mortgages and are trapped.

What problems do you face in terms of working conditions?

We work full time, whilst our counterparts in Europe only work part time given the highly stressful nature of the job. We work a full 8 hours from 6.30 a.m. to 4 p.m. or 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. during French winter time, and our breaks are not counted in the working hours. We have to take our lunch break at 10 a.m. Moroccan time, so as to coincide with lunchtime in France. We're completely out of phase, and on top of that we have to remain connected and ready to answer a call if required. Some call centres work around the clock with three teams working 8-hour shifts.

What are the stress factors?

The employees are under constant surveillance, being listened to and checked on. That's a major stress factor. In the morning, you start work and you hear "good morning everyone, this is Miss X who will be monitoring your calls from La Rochelle (a town in France)...". Each team is given a mark based on this monitoring. If someone is ill and brings down the result, the whole team is penalised. We become like machines, robots. Many of us suffer from backache, loss of hearing, depression, migraines, and rheumatism because of the air conditioning. My desk is located just beneath an air conditioning vent, and I have really bad rheumatism. There are one hundred people on a single plateau with very low ceilings. The working environment is totally inadequate. There are also quite a lot of nutritional disorders, as we cannot take our meals at the usual times. I once saw a woman suddenly throw off her headset, run to the window and faint. She was given water and sugar and went back to work. We have asked for an infirmary, but don't yet have it. As regards safety, if there were a fire, we'd be done for. The courtyard has been turned into a cafeteria, the emergency stairs are too narrow for the amount of employees and the boss has put bars up in a number of places that would block our exit.

Do the women face any specific problems?

The women usually work more assiduously, but they fall ill more often, as they stress more. Their right to three months' maternity leave is respected, but at many call centres the women coming back from maternity leave have to work double to make up for lost time, and they can forget about any hopes of career advancement. Sexual harassment is also a problem. There are lots of young, very pretty and well-educated women, who speak three languages.... Many of the expat executives take advantage of this, which explains quite a few of the job promotions we see. The young women are often from good families who have put a lot of money into their education, but their daughters are very soon denigrated.

Do you see the denial of these young workers' cultural identity as a major problem?

We have to change our first names and are forbidden from speaking Arabic in

the workplace. It is as if we left Morocco at 6 a.m. in the morning and spent the whole day on another planet. We are in constant contact with Swiss, Belgian and French people. We are exposed to cultural differences, prejudice, etc. In most call centres we have to take leave on French public holidays and work during our own national holidays and religious feast days. This conflict of cultures is in fact the most acute problem. These young people with their headsets constantly glued to their ears are completely disorientated, de-structured. We can expect to see huge psychological damage. Within 10 years, these young people will no longer be Moroccans; it's a big price to pay for DH 3500 a month!

Last year, you managed to unionise the first call centre in Morocco. How did you do that?

It was a singular experience. One day, to fight against the large numbers of staff quitting the company, the boss asked me to set up a system of workplace representatives, one for every 100 employees, as established by law. We organised union elections based on a single list. Then we started to discuss the problems. The managers were disappointed, as they had expected the shop stewards to be on their side. We then joined the CDT, we held a recruitment drive and over 60% of the staff is now CDT members. The other 40% corresponds to the proportion of continuous staff turnover.

What gains have you been able to secure thanks to unionisation? We have worked hard with the CDT and have secured the right to take leave on public holidays in Morocco, such as the "sheep festival," whereas previously we had to take a day off for Mardi Gras, which means nothing to us. Those who choose to work during French public holidays receive 300% pay for the first day and 200% for the second. Those who do not work on Moroccan public holidays are paid all the same.

Initially, the management would speak to the shop stewards as if they were children. They would whine and complain, insisting on the need to meet customers' needs. For our part, we had a number of gaps in our knowledge of the labour legislation. After receiving training from the CDT, our relations with the management saw a real change. We are very conscious that we are offering a service, and we use strike action in a responsible way. Prior to the general strike called by the CDT in May, we had already held a three-hour work stoppage. We had come out in a position of strength, which meant that we were able to make a conciliatory gesture for the general strike called by the CDT. We declared a strike by 100% of the staff, but we kept in 10% to ensure a minimum service for the customers. In exchange, the boss paid for the banners, the armbands and the transport for the strike. He understood our grievances and did not deduct any pay for the strike day. Both the employees and the employers are benefiting from trade union education.

The labour legislation does not cater for this new type of work. We are trying to make our bosses understand that we need a collective agreement that responds to this new reality.

What do you think about the contribution these foreign investments make to Moroccan society?

Call centres like Sitel are offshore. The investors agree to invest in

training and social benefits in return for the advantages they receive, but they don't. Sitel does no more than organise an annual social event that shows no respect for our culture and religion: an evening of dancing and drinking. We are fighting to have the budget for this event allocated to a cultural evening, which would serve as an opportunity to reveal the employees' artistic talents, with a theatre play, for example.

We need to review the relationship with our investors, so that the damage done to these young people is taken into account. The profit the French bosses make here in Morocco leaves them with plenty of room to meet our demands. There is a huge lack of insight. The only benefit Morocco draws from Sitel is our salaries - all the rest goes into Sitel's account in Switzerland.

Do you have any contact with trade unions in other countries?

We have had some contact with Sitel Portugal. But we would like to be in direct contact with the call centres in France, like the one in Rochelle, which we work with on a daily basis, so that we can compare our working conditions. We used to receive insults at first from our colleagues in La Rochelle, because we were "taking their jobs away," and I can understand that. But we also need respect; we all need to be treated like human beings. We know that there is an "international book" on the "virtues and values of the company," but it's not available on the Sitel site, and it's impossible for us to get a copy here in Morocco. But we do know that it is applied at the site in Montpellier (they have on-site crèches, for example, they can take breastfeeding breaks at work and have access to back and hand massages to alleviate problems such as pins and needles, etc.). We should also have the right to a minimum amount of space, ergonomic chairs to help us cope with the eight hours' work, quality headsets to filter the surrounding noise, screens that are not positioned in front of windows, etc. We would like to be able to count on the solidarity of our European colleagues. Globalisation is increasingly shifting from being a battle between the North and the South to one between the rich and the poor, be they from Morocco, France or elsewhere. The poor must unite, which is why contact between trade unions from all countries is so important. There is no reason why we should be harmful to one another; we are all on the same side. The management is aware that we are underpaid, but they come back with the threat of competition from Tunisian or other workers. We would like to have meetings, visits and exchanges. We are planning to launch an information and discussion space on the Web. We want to use the potential offered by Internet to communicate more.

I saw a TV programme about the working conditions in English-speaking call centres in China. It was unbearable. It gave me goose pimples. We would like to be able to get together and draw up a working strategy based on respect for human beings everywhere in the world, with the same core standards to be respected. We need to widen our horizons so that we cannot be thrown aside and trampled on!

Your trade union involvement has come at a high price for you personally. How do you see the future?

Because I'm an activist and I'm constantly making demands, I've been working with the headset for five years, whereas I should have been assigned to a

higher position. The reason I'm staying on is to keep fighting, to make headway with the cause of call centres workers with the CDT, and to pursue my trade union mandate, which runs for another two years, to the very end. I would like to have a trade union posting in the future, so that I could devote myself entirely to unionising call centres. For the moment, another call centre is in the process of being unionised in Casablanca.

Call centre work will be one of the jobs of the next hundred years. But if we do not do anything concrete, we will be the new slaves of the next hundred years. We are going to see a whole generation of people suffering from illness and depression.

Interview by Natacha David

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