

The Production of a Cause for Activism in Argentina: Labor Organization in Call Centers

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Abstract

This paper focuses on activist labor organizing in call centers in Argentina. Following a strong tradition in anthropology that has debated the nature of resistance, it discusses previous explanations for labor organizing in call centers, critiquing the common assumption that labor conditions, work processes, and the relations that take place on the shop floor constitute the seed from which forms of resistance, protest, or activism progressively emerge. Instead, this paper describes the relations, practices, and tensions through which multiple actors came together to turn call center working conditions into a cause for political action in Argentina and the collaborations that made that process possible. Based on fieldwork with call center activists between 2012 and 2013, this paper reconstructs the forms of collective organization that established the problem of poor working conditions in call centers as a cause for political action.

Keywords: call centers, activism, resistance, collaboration, collective organization

The Work of Mobilizing: A Demonstration of Call Center Workers

One morning in September 2012, I was invited to attend a demonstration in the center of Buenos Aires, a few blocks away from the Plaza de Mayo, the symbolic epicenter of most demonstrations in the city. The demonstration was to be held outside a labor court, where two former call center workers had to make a statement as part of a trial demanding the reinstatement of workers in Teleperformance, one of the biggest call center companies operating in Argentina at the time. Teleperformance (TP) is a multinational company that provides IT and customer services. It operated in Buenos Aires in two different buildings—known by the streets they were located on, Hipólito Yrigoyen and Carlos Pellegrini—employing 700 workers in each. In 2011, the company decided to close Hipólito Yrigoyen as a result of the loss of one of the biggest accounts they had, a large Spanish mobile telecommunications company. Protesting the hundreds of jobs lost as a result, Yrigoyen's workers

held an important protest, blocking the streets around the building and occupying the building itself. Nonetheless, they couldn't stop the call center from closing. As I was told later that day, the lawsuit demanded the reinstatement of six workers who had been dismissed when the building was closed, and two of the ex-workers were acting as witnesses.

Before that day, the only information I had about the lawsuit was provided by the leaflet convening the demonstration. On it were three demands: "Stop the judicialization of call center workers that confront labor precarity," "Reinstatement of all dismissed workers of TP Yrigoyen," and "Closing of all criminal cases."¹ The leaflet didn't state clearly the reasons to support the reinstatement of those particular six workers, but instead appealed in a somewhat vague manner to all call center workers, as subjects of judicialization and precarity. In fact, that day at the demonstration, I got the sense that most of the 40 or 50 people there had never worked in Teleperformance. The demonstration consisted of standing on the sidewalk outside the court while four men in their forties, who belonged to ATE-CTA (one of the public workers' unions), played drums and a trumpet, alternating with speeches and short notes written by the different groups that were present (*notas de adhesión*), read on a microphone. Several flags were hung at the front of the courthouse: the one from ATE-CTA was one of the first, followed by a flag of the Student Body of the Faculty of Architecture and Design of the University of Buenos Aires, several flags pertaining to leftist socialist and Maoist parties (e.g., the Revolutionary Communist Party), and two flags from the call center activism organizations *La Chispa-Trabajadores de Call Centers* (The Spark Call Center Workers) and *Colgá La Vincha* (Hang the Headset). Meanwhile, most of the people present—mostly men and women in their twenties—chatted in small groups and greeted people they knew, shouting over the sound of the drums and the sound system.

The meaning of the demonstration puzzled me at first. Why were they demanding the reinstatement of only 6 workers, when more than 400 had been dismissed? What was the goal of all the effort invested

in the lawsuit, the demonstrations, the leaflets, if, as Coco—one of the founder activists of Colgá La Vincha—told me that day, the reinstatement of the six workers was almost impossible? The analysis of protest actions as a product of rational calculation has been the object of much discussion in the social sciences, and studies have stressed the role of experiences, traditions, emotions, and affect in engagement and mobilization (Goodwin et al. 2001; Quirós 2011; Fernández Álvarez 2011, 2017). In this sense, the demonstration was probably a means of political enclosure where activists enacted their participation in a collective and constituted themselves as ethical-political subjects, a form of action with a strong tradition in Argentina (Lazar 2017). There was nevertheless a strategic goal in it, but I understood it only months after, when the trial ended in a negotiation between the parts, in which TP withdrew the criminal cases they had filed against the workers that occupied TP Yrigoyen in 2011. That is, I eventually understood that the lawsuit and the corresponding demonstrations and actions were part of a learnt strategy to generate the conditions for negotiation, whereby both the company and the activists knew what was really at stake and what steps they should follow.

While the demonstration was at once affective and strategic, it also held an additional meaning for the activists, one that I aim to highlight in the pages that follow. Specifically, the demonstration was a means of *mobilizing*—a translation of the Spanish words *organizar* and *activar* that the activists used when describing their efforts. Usually conjugated in a transitive way, *organizar* and *activar* imply an effort of mobilizing others. In fact, when I asked Anahí—a sociology student and former employee of Action Line in her early twenties who was distributing leaflets that day—what was happening at the other, still operational TP building, she told me:

Now it's really quiet, it has always been quieter [than Yrigoyen], but there was a lot of worker turnover [*recambio*]. We'll see, she [pointing to the girl who is speaking on the microphone] has been distributing leaflets there, but it's like a fresh start, maybe with this action [*movida*] we'll be able to mobilize workers there.

In fact, all of the people I met that day—including the ones I already knew—were not at the moment call center workers, but instead ex-workers, or political and student activists who were there to demonstrate solidarity. And many of them were both. Some had become activists as a result of their engagement in the workplace—like Anahí. Others, like Coco, had already been engaged in political parties or student movements prior to working in call centers and

continued their activism even after being laid off or quitting. Activists like the ones present that day were the ones that ensured the whole process of mobilization that involved the lawsuit: the demonstrations, the design and distribution of leaflets in different call center buildings, the accompaniment of the workers that initiated the lawsuit and of those who acted as witnesses. As I could see throughout my fieldwork, call center activism was strongly based on the actions and knowledge of ex-workers and political activists aimed at mobilization and, for many of them, this goal of mobilization was the main purpose of actions like the demonstration I described.

Call Center Work in Argentina: The Conditions for Mobilization

This paper analyzes how call center work in Argentina became the object of a social construction that defined it as a cause for mobilization. Through the ethnographic account of meetings and demonstrations that gathered call center activists, I suggest that the constant efforts made by activists to mobilize call center workers combined with a number of collaborations and specific conditions in the production of call center work as a common cause for mobilization in Argentina. More broadly, I argue that this analysis has important implications for the way we understand the emergence of organization or resistance in the workplace.

Call center work expanded in Argentina in the aftermath of a deep economic and social crisis between 2001 and 2002, when the devaluation of the national currency, the peso, generated a massive flux of off-shore call center companies, which provided outsourced services both for local and international corporations, with a peak of expansion between 2007 and 2010. Simultaneously, in-house call centers multiplied in service companies such as banks, airlines, and cable TV firms. Buenos Aires, the capital city, was at the beginning the main location of both. The sector reached at its peak (2009) 60,000 workers, and around 54,000 in 2013, even though there are no comprehensive statistics available. The main companies operating in the country in 2010 were ATENTO, Teleperformance, Teletech, Action Line (afterward bought by Aegis), ApexSykes, Telecom, Multivoice-Grupo ACSICT Services, Next Qualyte (Del Bono 2010).

Worldwide, call centers have been considered a paradigmatic expression of global work transformations, and understood as an archetype of the consequences of globalization, outsourcing, and offshoring, as well as of working conditions characterized by routinization, labor flexibilization, and affective labor that produce increased mental and psychological stress for

workers (Antunes and Braga 2009; Krishnamurthy 2004; Mankekar and Gupta 2016; Patel 2010; Sharma and Gupta 2006). The expansion of call centers in Argentina between 2001 and 2010 was also understood in these terms (Abal Medina 2011a, 2013; Del Bono and Bulloni 2008; Fariña and Gutiérrez 2001; Garró 2010; Neffa 2001; Roitman et al. 2010). Call centers fed from a vast available labor force, and especially from young inexperienced college students who provided at the same time communication skills (in Spanish as well as in English) and cheap labor in a context of high rates of youth unemployment. At least in the beginning, then, call center work didn't employ or repurpose workers deemed disposable, as it has been shown in other countries (Rodkey 2016).

Nevertheless, as the crisis started to pass, organized complaints began to emerge, and the profession diversified. The search for lower labor costs led to a diversity of higher- and lower-end call center jobs. For example, during my fieldwork between 2012 and 2013, I was told that some call centers relied on the work of young people who "needed to work," and especially on single mothers. At the same time, the call center industry expanded to other provinces of the country, where tax exemptions and local policies aimed to attract new kinds of jobs that would ensure youth employment. Previous research analyzed this expansion as a process of the fragmentation of productive processes and the diversification of working conditions, conceived as factors that *limited* the organization of call center workers (e.g., Abal Medina 2013; Del Bono and Henry 2009; Henry 2007; Roitman et al. 2010). Following Lygia Sigaud (2005), I propose instead to understand them as conditions in which call center mobilization emerged—that is, as a historical, global, and local network of social relations that call center activists managed in their effort to mobilize call center workers as subjects of a shared cause.

I therefore consider the production of a common cause for collective mobilization as a process, meaning not only a concatenation of events but also a dynamic of social production (Gaztañaga 2014) that highlights the everyday work activists perform to mobilize. From this standpoint, I follow Anna Tsing's understanding of social mobilization as always based on the negotiation of more or less recognized differences in the goals, objects, and strategies of the cause (Tsing 2005, X). In her study of both predatory practices and local empowerment struggles over rainforests in Indonesia, Tsing brings forward an understanding of social mobilization as a product of *collaborations* that make it possible. Tsing argues for the need to move beyond the common sense assumption that solidarity means homogeneity, focusing instead on how "*social mobilizations are also held up and redirected by their inclusion of varied groups, who disagree about what are supposed to*

be common causes and objects of concern" (Tsing 2005, 245–46). To understand the production of common causes, Tsing suggests studying the formation of collaboration goals that draw diverse social groups into common projects at the same time that they allow groups to keep their own agendas or programs. She argues that collaborations take place through frictions, a metaphor that emerges in dialogue with the idea that, in a globalized world, the flow of goods, ideas, money, and people would be "pervasive and unimpeded" (2005, 5). Instead, frictions in collaboration give rise to emergent politics, even if they are still immersed in the power relations that precede them. I draw on Tsing's theory to examine the production of call center work as a cause for social mobilization in Argentina, displaying the multiple collaborations that shaped it, both in spite of and through friction and dissent.

As a part of a broader project on young workers' activism in the telecommunications sector, this paper is based on fieldwork with call center activists between 2012 and 2013. I also draw on materials from a longer time frame through the accounts of activists, secondary sources, and previous studies, including my own research on the telecommunications sector in Argentina (Wolanski 2014, 2015, 2016). Call center activism faced a deep crisis during the period of my fieldwork, and protest had ceased or was very limited in most call centers. Several factors combined to produce this situation. First, companies' strategies of relocation shifted call center work from big cities to provinces where worker and union organizations were weaker, and by 2012 most call centers were leaving the country for cheaper locations like Peru. As a result, call center activists were facing the shutdown of buildings and accounts, with the consequent dismissal of workers. Second, by 2012 Argentina's economic crisis was long gone, and both economic growth and employment rates had stabilized. Moreover, beginning in 2003, governmental policies ensured union power, collective bargaining, and high salaries as means for mass consumption and the expansion of the economy, even if they did so unequally and never fully encompassed all workers (see Abal Medina et al. 2017). Although not automatically, this provided young workers with greater job opportunities and expectations, at the same time that it channeled activism toward other goals. The expansion of call centers had reached its peak and started receding, without attaining the relevance the industry had in other national contexts, where it shaped both state and labor (e.g., in India or the Philippines, see Sharma and Gupta 2006; Padios 2018). Nevertheless, in the midst of its expansion, call center work did characterize the experience of a generation of young workers (Abal Medina 2013; Wolanski 2016).

That said, activists persisted in their efforts to mobilize call centers, and I was able to attend a few public demonstrations, some very underground meetings, and a National Encounter of Call Center Workers, all of which were complemented by extensive interviews with call center activists and workers. In what follows, I examine a National Encounter of Call Center Workers that took place in 2013, displaying some of the debates that emerged and how they illustrate the collaborations and frictions that shaped call center activism. From this standpoint, I reconstruct how these collaborations between multiple actors with different goals and strategies shaped the production of call center work as a common cause for collective mobilization in Argentina between 2000 and 2013. Finally, I reflect on what the efforts to mobilize call center workers can illuminate about common understandings of resistance and/or organization in the workplace.

The National Encounter of Call Center Workers: *Organizing Through Collaborations*

The First National Encounter of Call Center Workers took place in July 2013 in the city of Córdoba, Argentina. It was organized by the Union of Call Center Operators (UNOCC) of Córdoba, the activist group Colgá la Vincha of Buenos Aires, and an umbrella confederation for both organizations, the “autonomous” *Central de Trabajadores de Argentina* (CTA), then part of the opposition to the national government.² The assembly was planned as an attempt at coordination between activists of different organizations and cities that, although belonging to the CTA, defended their own, sometimes contrasting, political lines of action. Monopolized by activists of Córdoba and the city of Buenos Aires, most of the activists were former call center workers that belonged to different leftist political parties, although some of them were still currently working there, and a small number of participants were workers with no strong political identification beyond their workplace. The assembly also brought together a number of people somehow involved in collaborations with call center organizations: a physician, a legislator’s assistant, CTA’s representatives, a representative of the only Uruguayan union confederation PIT–CNT, a sociologist, and myself as an anthropologist.

The assembly started after lunch, on a cold winter Saturday. A relatively big room in a local union’s old building was set up for it, with lines of plastic chairs facing a projector with a PowerPoint presentation. A Cordovan physician, the director of the “Stress Medicine Association,” opened the assembly with a presentation on what he defined as the *call center syndrome*, drawing on his extensive experience treating psychological and physical distresses in call

center workers. He spoke of the burnout, nervous breakdowns, and other stress-induced pathologies, including heart and gastrointestinal conditions that affected many call center workers. Such experiences of suffering had been described to me firsthand by every call center worker I had encountered, linked to unbearable work rhythms, constant pressure and measurement of achievements and results, hidden pervasive recording of calls, union persecution, and random dismissals.

Even though the symptoms and their relation with working conditions had the consensus of the entire audience, that wasn’t the case for the solutions. One of the participants, a young woman in her early twenties, short-haired and “punk” styled, posed the question that triggered the first debate of the evening: “Are there any ways in which these effects can be lowered without leaving the call center?” The doctor’s opinion was expressed in clinical terms: he recommended that his patients change jobs, and when that was not possible, advised “to not care,” to let go of production requirements, prizes, and schedules. Another of the participants, an activist of Colgá La Vicha, nevertheless asked if call center work always and necessarily would be that stressful and suggested that workers, through their organization, could generate a change. But the doctor insisted: in the world, where considerable improvements in working conditions were legislated for call centers, companies just left for another location. And he insisted on a solution that tagged the question to an individual level:

Most of the workers have the capacity—because they are so young—to be normal (sic) in two or three months. What’s important is to teach them. There are other jobs that are better for them; we orient them, for instance, to jobs in communication for companies, where they have to read newspapers, magazines. The girls that afterward try it as cashiers generally can’t stand it for too long, because of the stress, and the symptoms come back ... My advice is always to get trained, to study, to generate a job where they have more autonomy. The one that studied biology and left the career, he should study to be a teacher, because stress—even if it exists—is lower in a teaching position.

Both the spirit of despair and the individual solutions proposed were uncomfortable for the young activists. “Maybe it is just easier for most to change jobs than to change the job,” one of them expressed, annoyed.

Collaboration with engaged experts—mostly doctors, psychologists, and labor sociologists—was one of the main strategies for call center activists to

legitimize and support their demands. Through their disciplinary knowledge, they denounced call center work and its working conditions and advocated for changes in legislation. In the assembly, however, some of the disagreements in that dialogue emerged. The medical definition of a syndrome as a result of a certain activity, which is perhaps the strongest finding in clinical terms, turned out to be contradictory to activism's goal of mobilizing workers to modify working conditions. At the same time, medical recommendations centered on the health of the individual, proposing solutions that seemed to go against collective organization.

After that first presentation, one of the hosts, a man in his thirties, part of the local UNOCC, stood at the front of the room, welcomed the participants, and announced a change in the program due to the presence of Fernando, an assistant of the national congressman Victor De Gennaro. De Gennaro was a union leader of the state workers and the CTA and served in Congress between 2011 and 2015. To make the most of his presence, the local organizers had decided to continue the evening by discussing a project to create a Phone Operator Law (*Ley del Teleoperador*), which meant leaving the discussion of working conditions in call centers for the next day, a change that was not welcomed by participants who argued that workplace mobilization should come before legislative initiatives. The debate started with an intervention by an "independent" Cordovan call center worker who argued that the law was not the most urgent subject, but rather "awareness raising" was, given the assembly's low attendance (around 30 participants). Some activists agreed and contended that mobilization should come before discussing the law, while others pled that the law itself, "well made, well written," could be a tool to take to each workplace to mobilize. Abruptly, a man rose from his seat and introduced himself as a high leader (*secretario gremial*) of the Cordovan regional section of the CTA. He cut the debate short and discussed the issue of low turnout: "I come from the private sector, and this [attendance], in the private sector, is a lot. In the private sector we are unstable, persecuted. For me, this here is great. Don't forget that only 15 percent of workers in the private sector are unionized."³ Fernando, the assistant, intervened to acknowledge the importance of mobilization: "For you, this project is just a platform, a platform for you to mobilize. What happens with the project in Congress depends on the balance of power between social mobilization, the state, and the companies. But the idea is that the project can be discussed with coworkers at the workplace." The debate was somewhat heated, but in the end, after these interventions, it gave way to a discussion of the law, as intended by the hosts.

Two debates were intertwined in the above interaction. First, there was a debate over the relative significance of legislative initiatives versus workplace mobilization. Second, there was a related debate over how to evaluate the attendance at the Encounter. The Phone Operator Law was at the time the most important public initiative concerning call centers: five consecutive projects to implement such a law were presented to the National Congress between 2005 and 2013. The fourth project was due to expire shortly thereafter, and the time was pressing to present a new one. In that scenario, the presence of a national congressman's assistant was a major asset. But, for activists, engaging in a discussion of the law before considering the experiences of workplace mobilization subverted their priorities and seemed to subordinate militant activity to legislative initiatives. The *noise* in the collaboration even reached the interactions with high CTA representatives, for whom the Phone Operator Law and the connections with congressmen were of greater significance.

As Tsing (2005) states, collaborations take place through frictions that shape them, giving rise to emergent politics that are still immersed in the power relations that precede them. In that process, some forms of knowledge, some definitions of the situation, and some ways of action impose themselves, while others are suppressed. At the same time, collaborations tend to erase themselves, hiding their own existence and, most importantly, hiding the "noises" that friction produced. In the assembly, both the doctor and the assistant were considered experts, and their knowledge, opinion, and/or political connections were valued. But this didn't mean that they could subordinate those of the activists, and dissent was openly expressed. I propose here that collaborations like the ones enacted in the assembly enabled the construction of call center work as a common cause for mobilization, and the frictions in those collaborations—even if hidden from outside audiences—also shaped the priorities, courses of action, and horizons conceived.

The Process: The Production of Call Centers as a Cause

The interactions previously analyzed shed light on how call centers came to be a common cause for mobilization in Argentina between 2000 and 2013, which implied the definition of a collective—call center workers—that didn't exist before. I briefly reconstruct here that process, which allows me to show that call center work as a cause for activism was not already configured, nor was it an immediate consequence of working conditions in call centers.

In Argentina, around the turn of the century, phone support services—that at the time were only beginning to be known as call centers—were not

conceived as a distinct activity. They were part of the client support services provided by phone companies, and their existence dated back to a century earlier, to the work of phone operators. In the 1990s, the privatization of the national phone company introduced massive restructuring and technological transformations in those services, and for the first time, working conditions and health consequences of phone operating were an object of union concern. Labor sociologists and psychologists were at the time important allies of telecommunications' unions reporting of the consequences of privatization and restructuring (see Cifarelli and Martínez 2001; Fariña and Gutiérrez 2001; Neffa 2001).

Telecommunications unions were in fact important leaders of the first mobilization known in the country to be held by call center workers, in the company ATENTO. FOETRA—the main telecommunications union in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, which comprises around 20,000 workers of landline and cellular telephone companies—played a key role in denouncing the emptying of phone operating centers in Telefónica de Argentina S.A. and the outsourcing of those services to ATENTO, which was 40 percent owned by Telefónica and paid significantly lower wages for the same task, contravening labor legislation. Led by FOETRA, ATENTO workers occupied one of the company's buildings in August 2004, and then two more times without union support in the following year. The main demand expressed in that first mobilization was the incorporation of ATENTO's workers in the collective bargaining agreement of FOETRA, questioning their legal framing as commerce workers.⁴

It wasn't easy though, and ATENTO workers became isolated over time and increasingly sieged by arbitrary dismissals, straightforward threats on activists, and, most importantly, the relocation to new call centers in other provinces of the country. Yet this first mobilization remained an important precedent for future struggles. In fact, it wasn't easy for activists to define a common platform as call center workers. Their diversity conditioned their actions, as their initial demand to be considered telecommunications workers clashed with the goals of in-house call center organizations, who fought to be included in the collective bargaining agreements of their respective companies (e.g., as airline, bank, or television workers). At the same time, because ATENTO was owned by Telefónica (one of the main telecommunications corporations in the country), it was seen as a special case for FOETRA. Expanding and mobilizing for other call centers proved to be more difficult for the union, as a number of leaders and activists preferred to stick to battles that didn't impinge on the turf of other unions, such as the powerful commerce employees federation

(FAECYS), the biggest labor federation in the country, and a deeply controversial one that focuses on the provision of services to its affiliates while maintaining a significantly low presence at the workplaces (see Abal Medina 2011b).

All of this resulted in the first mobilization losing strength. In parallel, a second strategy took shape: a project for a Phone Operator Law that would regulate all phone-operating activities (and brand new online customer service ones too), broadly defined. The project was first presented in September 2005 to the National Congress as an initiative of FOETRA, and was backed by the previously cited corpus of research in labor psychology and sociology. As I mentioned above, however, the law was never discussed by Congress, and five successive projects were submitted—the last one in 2013, shortly after the encounter in Córdoba. The set of projects, as well as their defeat, revealed both the support of diverse political parties and personalities and the strong resistance to regulating phone-operating activities by lobbyists for corporations and provincial governments.

Meanwhile, activists didn't sit still and wait for legislative initiatives to develop. Based on a diagnosis that the possibility of relocation was the main weakness for union action, young activists of FOETRA went to Córdoba in 2006 in an attempt to mobilize local call center workers. There, the regional telecommunications union had no interest in the subject. In that context, in Córdoba, activists from different political parties and union confederations created call center unions, like the ATCACC (*Asociación de Trabajadores de Centros de Contacto y Afines de Córdoba*) and the UNOCC, but with little real incidence in workplaces. In Buenos Aires, slow and difficult processes of mobilization began after ATENTO, limited in most cases to one building of one company, or even to some of the accounts. Two of them had the stronger impact in call center activism as a whole: those of workers at building Arribeños of Action Line, and at building Yrigoyen of Teleperformance. They were triggered by specific conflicts in the workplace: in the first one, it was the swine flu epidemics in 2008 and the refusal of the company to respect sick leaves and health and safety measures; in the second, it was a general reaction to the company's policies of strong pressure on the times, sales, and "results" of the workers.

Both were pressed forward by activists based in leftist parties and included massive mobilizations, headset-hanging strikes, and building occupations. Headset-hanging strikes (*cuelgues de vincha*) were rapidly emulated in other call centers. They consisted of the simultaneous interruption of all operating in a call center: all operators at once took off their headsets and hung them in their box. It was established as a method of protest, pre-organized

or spontaneous, that allowed workers to stop production without going on strike. Nonetheless, both Arribeños and Yrigoyen ended—as in ATENTO—with the closure of the buildings and the relocation of the accounts to other buildings or provinces. But even so, activists consider them to have been “successful.” The success consisted mainly in the possibility of electing workplace union representatives, in a context where most call centers in the country had no union presence, which also led to an alliance between leftist activists and a fraction in the Commerce Employees Union that tried to win the union’s elections in 2010. Activists evaluated success in terms of the organization built, not of modifications in the companies’ policies or working conditions. For example, Nahuel, an activist that worked in Action Line, recalled at the National Encounter the history of activism in the company as a process that added experience and had allowed them to learn how to mobilize, in spite of and against the policies displayed by the company to discourage workers’ organization:

When they fired me and they fought for my reinstatement, they [Action Line] fired them again, Natalia and Pamela. And we carried a week of conflict at the door of the building where we also conquered the reinstatement of Nati and, well, sadly Pamela chose to leave. But beyond that result, that process was really important for a lot of kids [*pibes*]. See, one thing that was central, that we did to mobilize, was the leaflets, those were the spine that helped us. And we learnt a lot from Teleperformance too, they helped us mobilize the kids and escalate the conflict.

As Nahuel recounted, to try to break down the diverse conditions of their work, activists attempted to build coordination between call centers: an *Asamblea Intercall* (Intercall Assembly) and also a *Coordinadora de Trabajadores Precarizados* (Coordinating Group of Precarious Workers), that searched for coordination beyond call center work. As I mentioned earlier, leftist parties—of Trotskyist, Maoist, or socialist orientation—created specific groupings, and many of them purposely sent their activists to take jobs there, in order to mobilize. While many times divided in their political positions, they shared a common diagnosis that each call center by itself would be defeated. The assembly analyzed in the previous section of this paper was then part of a long series of attempts to coordinate as call center workers.

In conclusion, call center work became a common cause for mobilization through the work of activists, including call center workers, but also—among others—union activists, leftist parties, lawmakers,

and academics. Each one of these defined not only the actions but also the objectives of the mobilization in its own terms. For unions, it was a dispute over the legal framing of call center workers and/or against companies’ strategies of outsourcing and relocation. For leftist parties, it was a chance to mobilize workers bottom-up and on the basis of class, and so mobilization was a goal in itself. For fractions in the commerce union, it was a unique chance to question the union leadership and its antidemocratic practices. For engaged academics and lawmakers, it was a chance to question work organization that affected workers’ health. Last, but not least, in each call center, workers had their own demands and concerns, and these were even specific of each account and building. In all, call center workers’ collective organization formed through collaboration in disagreement and in the frictions it produced.

Reflections on Collective Organization

During a period of almost 10 years in Argentina, call center work came to be highlighted among the multiple industries and considered as a cause that deserved a substantial effort on the part of activists to mobilize. This verb appeared in all activists’ accounts of their political action in a way that was independent of any specific object or goal. It was not about who was mobilized or what a person mobilized for, but rather, it was the mere activity of mobilizing that defined their activism. This expression points directly to the day-to-day work activists perform to create collective organization and incite protest. In this way, the image of a collective of call center workers that mobilized in response to abusive working conditions, or resisted them—each and every time on their own—dissolves into a more complex picture. Call centers came to be a cause for mobilization through the constant work of activists to mobilize, to coordinate, to expand, and to pass on strategies, as well as through collaborations with multiple actors and experts—doctors, psychologists, sociologists, lawyers, legislators, and union leaders. This does not mean that workers’ experiences of abuse and exploitation were unimportant in their decisions to react through protest and collective mobilization. Rather, those reactions were understood and enabled by the work of activists and a web of collaborations. Thus, instead of focusing on conflict as unequivocal and unifying, I encountered collaborations through the differences that shaped demands and actions. As Tsing (2005) proposed, examining collaborations means to distance ourselves from a romantic perspective that assumes causes need to be shared in order to be successful. The very idea of success is in turn questioned and rendered more complex by this analysis, turning away from a rational action matrix of analysis where mobilizations are

displayed in order to achieve goals that are fixed and agreed upon in advance. For many of the activists I encountered, for instance, mobilizing was not only a means but a goal of their actions, and a goal that was not merely ideological but deeply felt as a life project.

This analysis points to a broader discussion of workers' modes of organization. The processes of mobilization carried out by call center workers in Argentina were the object of much debate and stimulating analysis. Whereas some studies explored activists' ideologies and protest repertoires (Abal Medina 2011a), most of them shared a common diagnosis, which established that mobilization in call centers faced a number of limits, and so they explored outsourcing as a cause for division; the influence of union politics and fragmentation in activist ideologies; workers' youth as a limit; and workers' emotions and bodily experiences, focusing on discipline and fear (Abal Medina 2011a, 2013; Bosque 2010; Del Bono and Bulloni 2013; Del Bono and Henry 2009; Henry 2007; Lisdero 2012; Montes Cató 2005). Underlying this search for limits was a shared assumption: that abusive labor conditions or strenuous work processes will eventually lead to what the authors called "modes of resistance," or "modes of organization." Namely, that labor conditions, work processes, and the relations that take place at the workplace constitute the seed from which forms of resistance, protest, or activism progressively emerge.

The analysis presented in this paper allows me to challenge, following Matthew Gutmann (2009), that mobilization doesn't fully emerge from labor conditions, nor does it naturally evolve from resistance to organization. Anthropology provides a strong tradition in discussing the notion of resistance. Its popularity as an analytical construction grew in the decades of the 1980s and 90s, along with the prevalent disappointment among scholars regarding socialism as a political option and Marxism as an explicative theory of power relations (Abu-Lughod 1990). Nevertheless, its extended use has been criticized, for it tends to situate resistance in the space of the hidden and infrapolitics, leading to a dichotomy between open public expressions of confrontation and hidden everyday forms of resistance (Gutmann 1993) and an implicit hierarchy between them that praises public actions over everyday resistances and obscures the everyday actions that allow the construction of mobilizations (Fernández Álvarez 2012). Gutmann (2009) challenged the common assumption that resistance and organization are linked by an evolutionary transition, critiquing analyses that assume that somehow "hidden and undercover activities [...] lead straight to a substantial breaking of the *statu quo*" (2009, 212, my translation).

This way of addressing historical processes tends to take for granted the direction of social processes. That is, resistance is understood as a linear result of working

conditions, and its limits as a direct consequence of structural processes. This causal understanding has been criticized by Sigaud (2005), who instead analyzed how global and local networks of social relations acted as conditions of possibility for the construction of collective organization—in her research, the occupation of sugarcane plantations in northern Brazil. This allowed her to stress not only the historical specificity of the movement, but also the agency of the activists that constructed it. As E. P. Thompson (1995) elaborated for eighteenth-century hunger riots in England, there are many things that people do when they are hungry, and rebelling is just one of the possibilities. In the same direction, working conditions do not explain the emergence of collective organization and, in this paper, I aimed to show the conditions which made that emergence possible. That is, instead of searching for the limits that activism faced (taking for granted that call centers were meant to seed resistance), I investigated the specific relations, practices, and tensions through which multiple actors came together to turn call centers into a common cause that drove collective mobilization in Argentina. In this sense, it wasn't only fragmentation or the volatility of the call center industry that acted as conditions for call center mobilization; this was possible through the combination of a strong and diversified tradition of unionism and leftist activism, the militant knowledge of strategies and steps to push forward a cause—available even for young activists—and an important web of engaged experts willing to collaborate.

A final thought involves our place as anthropologists and academics. Once, during a demonstration, Fernando, an ex-worker at Teleperformance and youth leader in the CTA, signaled a goal for my presence there: "It would be good if you wrote about our organizations, because everyone always writes about how screwed we are." Somehow, this phrase summarizes my own place in the construction of collaborations that uphold call center work as a cause for mobilization.

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Notes

- 1 Social sciences have borrowed the category of *judicialization of politics* from social movements to refer to different interrelated processes, including the juridization of language in the political and policymaking sphere, the

expansion of the province of law and judges in determining public policy outcomes and core political controversies, and the use of judicial procedures by social movements for filing claims (Hirschl 2008; Tríguboff et al. 2013). In the leaflet, activists were referring to the initiation of criminal proceedings by companies against call center workers. But the strategy of pursuing a lawsuit against Teleperformance could also be analyzed in these terms.

- 2 The CTA (*Central de Trabajadores de Argentina*) was created in 1994 as an alternative union confederation to the traditional CGT (*Confederación General del Trabajo*). Among its foundational principles was the questioning of traditional union politics and modes of organization. The CTA was seen as an example of a “new” unionism, mainly because it aimed to represent not only formal workers but also those precarized and unemployed (see Palomino 2005). In 2010, the CTA divided into two separate confederations: one of them, the “CTA de los trabajadores,” close to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s government; the other, the “CTA Autónoma,” connected with different leftist parties and opposed to the national government.
- 3 Argentina is a country with a strong tradition of union activity. Statistics show a rate of 37 percent to 44 percent of unionization among registered workers for the period (Delfini 2013). The union leader took into account all nonregistered workers, which lowers the rate significantly.
- 4 Argentinian law establishes a monopoly of union representation for each category of work, meaning that only one union can represent workers in collective bargaining. Other unions in each category exist, but can only represent workers individually. This explains the existence of framing disputes between unions over a specific activity, such as call centers.

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