

Outsourcing Injustice:



Holding Teleperformance
Accountable for Abuses of
Its Colombian Workers



Spanish consumers rely on a massive, offshored workforce to handle countless customer service questions, requests, and complaints each day. The contact centre workers' polite, professional conduct hides the disturbing truth about the lack of respect for labour and human rights they endure working for companies who service well-known brands in Spain.

Paris-based Teleperformance (TP), the world's largest contact centre company, employs nearly 18,000 workers in Colombia. TP serves the Spanish market by providing support to customers of corporations, including Vodafone and Naturgy. In 2018 and 2019 a team of researchers engaged by UNI Global Union conducted in-depth interviews with contact centre workers in Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia, to gather information about working conditions and human rights compliance at TP worksites.

Despite the fear of retaliation by managers, workers revealed a wide range of abuses in several categories, including freedom of association, wages, sick leave, health and safety, and gender discrimination. The results of that research, summarized below, show the need for Spanish companies to exercise greater scrutiny and oversight of the companies that serve their customers and to call for significant changes at Teleperformance.

Poverty Pay and Alleged Under-Payment of Wages

TP workers report that their base wages cover only 60 to 70 percent of an average worker's basic expenses, including rent, transportation, utilities, and food. TP employees find that they regularly make even less than their expected wages. The company typically deducts about six hours per week from the working time logged by employees for water and restroom breaks, system malfunctions, and power outages over which workers have little or no control. Training periods, although mandatory, are unpaid.

As a result of these potentially unlawful deductions, many workers report that they "never reach the minimum wage" of €224 per month and that bonus incentives change often without adequate explanation, making it difficult to work toward goals and increase their pay. Some workers report never receiving legally required cost-of-living increases in their wages.

Workers often lose more pay as a result of incomplete or misprocessed authorizations for legally mandated sick leave or leave to care for sick children. Many workers report that they have to choose between financial survival and providing their children with necessary medical treatment—an impossible choice for any parent. "We don't have the right to get sick or go to a meeting at our kids' schools," one worker reported, "because it affects our income." For those barely making ends meet, one or two days of illness with no pay, or pay delayed weeks or months as a result of company negligence, can be disastrous.

Many employees become trapped in an impossible dilemma, taking out short-term loans and weighing their own or their children's health and safety against the need to keep earning, including going to work with viruses, colds, and even severe diarrhea.

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Gender-based Discrimination and Lack of Respect for Women's Privacy

Teleperformance claims to support "a future without discrimination" and to provide opportunities for all employees, "regardless of gender." Given this commitment, evidence from multiple interviews with Colombian workers suggests a pattern of gender-based harassment and invasions of women's privacy.

Since 1994, Colombian law has banned the practice of requiring women applying for a job to submit to a pregnancy test. However, women workers said that they were questioned extensively during job interviews about the health and ages of their children and were subjected to mandatory blood and urine tests to detect pregnancy. Men were not subjected to similar scrutiny about their families. One woman reported that her home was inspected as a condition of employment—a clear invasion of privacy.

A Disregard for Employee Safety

Women also reported frightening situations in which they were targeted by unscrupulous drivers who threatened them if they did not pay high fees to travel home from work after shifts that ended late at night because there was no reliable public transportation available. Although Teleperformance offers a limited transportation service during the night and early hours of the morning, workers have reported that it is inadequate to meet their security needs. As one TP employee described:

I left work late—got a taxi between 10 and 10:30 p.m., and this time the driver was charging me 20,000 [Colombian pesos], but it should have been a lot less. . . He said he would call the police if I didn't pay, but I told him I would pay what the trip was worth. When I got out of the taxi, the driver pushed me and hit me. I ran into the street, and he said he would kill me. I knocked on the door of a house until they opened the door, and the man left. There is no security.

In other countries, Teleperformance provides transportation for workers who may face dangers while commuting after late shifts. Other major multinational corporations provide safe transportation options for low-wage workers.

Repression of Workers' Right to Join a Union

For decades, Colombia has been well-documented as a nation prone to anti-union violence and one of the region's most hostile environments for labour organizing. Workers in Colombia said they are afraid that talking with union-affiliated researchers may lead to retaliation from management if it is viewed as an effort to organize.

UNI Global Union's investigators found that TP managers cultivate an atmosphere of fear and intimidation in order to prevent workers from forming a union. When investigators asked interviewees about the reaction of the company if workers work to organise in a trade union, all responded that they would be fired to undermine the organising and send a message to the other workers.

Union representation is particularly important in Colombia because labour laws are not generally enforced. With union representation, TP employees would gain the power to take action to improve the health and safety of their work environments and to address grievances related to wages, hours, and discrimination.

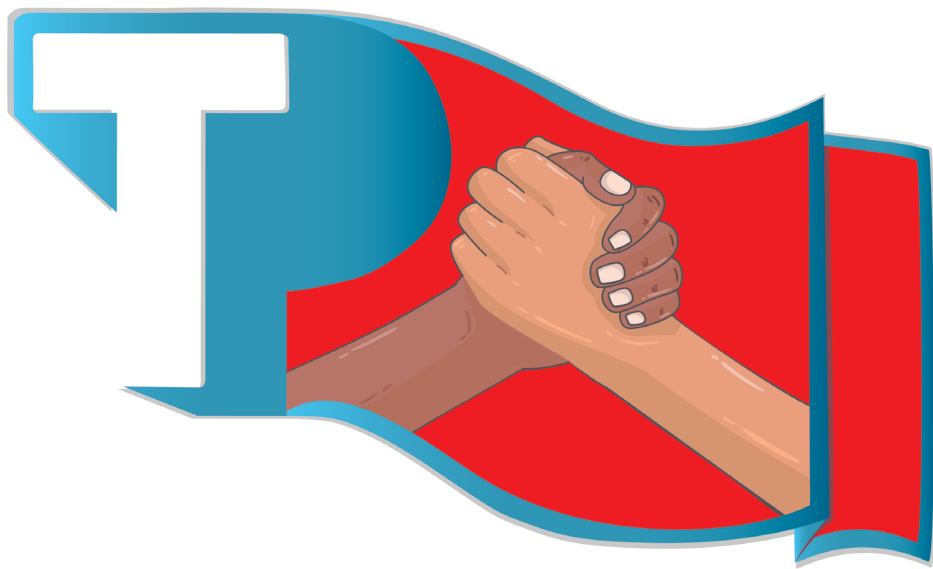
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Conclusion

A nation known for widespread violation of workers' rights and repression of trade union activity, including the assassination of more than four dozen union organizers in recent years, Colombia has earned a place on the International Trade Union Confederation's list of "the worst countries in the world to work." Under these circumstances, the need for strict adherence to and enforcement of policies that protect workers' rights and fundamental freedoms on the job around the world is essential.

It is alarming that the workers who thousands of Spanish consumers rely on for service and technical support every day are facing abusive workplace conditions. Companies that offshore customer service and technical support for the Spanish market to Colombia are responsible for worker abuses in their supply chain. They must hold TP accountable for unlawful and unethical practices.

This research shows why greater oversight of procurement practices are needed, including greater protections for workers who wish to join or form a union.



TELEPERFORMANCE UNION ALLIANCE
WORKERS' RIGHTS HAVE NO BORDERS