Behind the screens:

telemediated work in the Canadian public sector

Norene Pupo

Norene Pupo is an associate professor in the Department of Sociology and the director of the Centre for Research on Work and Society at York University, Toronto, Canada.

ABSTRACT

Among the recent measures undertaken in Canada to adapt the public sector to the 'new economy' in order to maintain or enhance economic competitiveness on an international level has been the adoption of new technologies and e-government, affecting both labour processes and service delivery. All three levels of government – municipal, provincial, and federal – have adopted 'virtual service techniques'. This paper examines telemediated processes and new work arrangements in the public sector and raises questions regarding the impact on workers and their trade unions, working conditions, service delivery, and social citizenship.

Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years, profound transformations in the worlds of work and employment have posed major challenges for workers in their search for secure and meaningful employment. Taken together, the emergence of new sectors, the restructuring of work in response to global economic pressures, the proliferation of non-standard and precarious forms of employment, the changing demographics of the labour market, and the social and technological reorganisation of the workplace have not only transformed work and employment themselves, but have also blurred the boundaries between secure and precarious employment, between core and marginal workers, between good jobs and bad jobs, and, more recently, between public and private sector work. While at one time work in the Canadian public sector, including clerical and administrative positions, was well regarded relative to private sector equivalents, today many of these jobs have been restructured, downsized, and degraded. Aspects of globalisation have tested government strategies for labour market development. Workers and their organisations have been challenged by processes of internationalisation and new measures of accountability afforded to global corporations. These in turn have had consequences for regional economic development and new work arrangements. Despite these massive transformations and widespread discussions about the notion of a 'new economy', few researchers are focussing on the restructuring and changing work arrangements within the public sector and their effects either on public sector work or on public services and their delivery.

In the Canadian context, measures recently undertaken to adjust public services to the 'new economy' in order to maintain competitiveness at an international level have meant adapting work to new technologies, affecting both labour processes and service delivery. This has been associated with a shift to e-government (or the delivery of services online). Canada is in the forefront of e-government worldwide and this trend has far-reaching consequences for public service workers and for all Canadians. A growing number of government workers are located in call centres, providing services and answering queries from the public on issues related to taxation, health, employment, and veterans' affairs, among other matters. In some cases these workplaces are managed directly by the government and in other cases they are operated by an outside corporation under contract with the government. In some cases, all services across Canada regarding a particular issue have been relocated to a single office. Most Canadians are unaware of the new structure of their public services and this new culture of service provision from remotely located offices.

This paper will examine key issues emerging for workers and their trade unions resulting from the increasing use of call centres and e-government to provide public services. The phenomenon of public service call centres and 'virtual service' can be located in the broader development of e-government, characterised by a greater reliance by governments on the delivery of information and services to the public through computer and communications technology. In the context of a growth in call centres where staff use telephones to provide services and/or respond to queries by email, this paper examines these new labour processes and the transformation of public sector work. In particular, it raises questions regarding the standardisation of public services, local issues and the quality of the information or service provided, work intensification, the likelihood of sub-contacting or privatisation of public services, and the implications for the organisation of workers within the public service.

Globalisation, work restructuring and the Canadian state

Social analysts have been concerned with questions of work restructuring, changing work arrangements, and the crisis in work within Canada for many years (Shalla & Clement, 2007; Jackson, 2005; Duffy, Glenday & Pupo, 1997). There is now ample evidence of a transformation of working conditions in both the public and private sectors. Within the traditional public sector strongholds of health care, social services and education, work arrangements are changing, and these new forms of work and flexibility standards have been presented as promising to empower workers while promoting organisational efficiency. Most of the recent literature on restructuring considers changing conditions and structures of work within the private sector and there has been relatively little study of the state as an employer or of the complex of factors that may contribute to changes in work within public services. Moreover, there is no consensus on the personal, political, cultural, and social significance of shifting work relations within the public domain.

A diverse set of factors is transforming public sector work. These include: mounting economic pressures to maintain a Canadian presence in the global economy; rising costs of social reproduction; fiscal crises; technological innovations; new management structures; and flexibility initiatives. Such transformations have included the privatisation

of some aspects of public sector work, the devaluation or deskilling of certain categories of work, and the elimination of some forms of work altogether. These changes raise questions regarding both working conditions and security for public sector workers and risks and benefits to the general public.

What are the new work arrangements in the public sector and what are the impacts on workers and their organisations, working conditions, service delivery, and social citizenship? Understanding work restructuring within the public sector requires a detailed consideration of the movement of work from the public domain to the realm of private enterprise as well as to the sphere of unpaid work. A number of social analysts (McBride, 2001, Evans & Shields, 1998) have examined the restructuring and shrinking of the state and the neo-liberal agenda for maintaining Canada's competitiveness in response to global economic pressures. Panitch & Swartz (2003) have argued that trade union rights and freedoms have been eroded over the past thirty years as governments at both provincial and federal levels have adopted neo-liberal business practices in the re-making of the 'lean' Canadian state. While studies have discussed the consequences of the state's decline for public sector workers in relation to job loss and growing precariousness, few have considered the changing labour processes and the growing reliance on telemediated work arrangements. One of the ways the Canadian state is responding to global economic pressures is by adopting private sector practices and promoting (real or anticipated) efficiencies by cheapening its services, engaging in fiscal restraint, shifting the costs of social programmes on to individual citizens or unions (as in the case of some de-listed health benefits) and finding ways to cut the cost of public service work and the size of the public sector labour force.

An evaluative investigation of its impact sheds light on the question of global economic transformation and the shift to the 'new economy'. For a number of years, focusing primarily on the private sector, social analysts have studied the global economic transformations that have occurred and asked whether they have contributed to greater employment opportunities or whether they have given rise to an increase in the number of peripheral, insecure jobs and consequently the losses of relatively secure, well-compensated, and respected positions. With workplace restructuring, social analysts have been concerned that there has been a measurable decline in the social condition of work and that shifts toward insecure, poorly compensated, non-standard work have overshadowed developments toward quality work. Work restructuring within the public sector has transformed the ways in which work is organised, managed and defined, and this in turn affects workers' sense of well-being and security, as well as their expectations regarding access to work. Changes in the public sector workplace also force trade unions to revisit their agendas as they are faced with changing work arrangements and new levels of insecurity amongst their memberships. Key issues in restructured public sector workplaces are the processes of privatisation, contracting out, commercialisation, and the use of temporary work agencies. These new arrangements impact heavily on workers and their families, on collective bargaining and trade unions, on social policy and the legal framework, and even on the meaning of social citizenship.

For Canada to mark its place within a global economic system in which internationalised capital and global organisations dominate, the Canadian state, along with other advanced capitalist states, has been engaged in repositioning itself (Teeple, 1995). According to Teeple, the process of globalisation has contributed to the transformation and decline of the welfare state in a dramatic shift in policy from Keynesianism to monetarism. Under Keynesianism, the welfare state and the public sector grew and social policies and programmes expanded. Keynesian policies were designed to complement the unprecedented growth in capital accumulation by stimulating or maintaining healthy market conditions in a number of ways, including: making workers feel more secure by enhancing social welfare programmes and promoting a liberal labour relations agenda; creating or maintaining the conditions necessary for a buoyant market within Canada, by designing programmes to enhance labour market functioning and working conditions; and assuming the costs of production through extensive health and education programmes.

During the 1970s, globalisation of production expanded, and within this context, Keynesian policies were replaced by a monetarist approach that was 'required by internationalised capital in a global economy' (Teeple, 1995: 70). To maintain its new status within the global economy, the state aimed to lower the costs of production and this meant dismantling the welfare state. In turn, this has led to restructuring of work and reorganisation of the public sector workplace. During the 1980s and early 1990s, downsizing became the order of the day. Downsizing in the public sector took two forms: the elimination of middle levels of public servants and the conversion of full-time (unionised) positions to part-time or contractually limited positions. Moreover, relatively well-paid, more highly educated and skilled workers were replaced when possible with lower-paid workers who often had fewer years of training and experience and were less highly educated. In health, for example, measures were taken to create 'generic' health-care workers with fewer years of education and training and consequently lower rates of pay (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1996). These 'generic' workers were often assigned tasks that had previously been in the job descriptions of highly skilled nurses.

More recently, public sector workers have faced new insecurities from freshly implemented work arrangements, such as privatisation, contracting out, and various forms of electronic monitoring and electronic work. Restructuring initiatives, including flexibility measures, new management practices, and technological change, along with what seem to be cost-effective processes to divest the state of its operational costs (privatisation and contracting out) have given rise to alternate work arrangements. Public sector unions are currently engaged in strategies to oppose such initiatives, arguing that they contravene existing collective agreements by removing guarantees of rights to work, security, and in some cases, seniority.

Technology and work re-organisation: government by the minute

Important recent initiatives aim to break down work groups, cheapen the costs of labour, and streamline management processes with the aim of increasing efficiency and lowering costs in the public sector. These objectives are met through various forms of telemediated work.

The analysis of technology and work re-organisation within the public sector that follows is largely based on focus group interviews with trade union researchers and staff members. This paper is the background for a major study I am currently conducting on call centres within the federal public service, involving a postal survey with follow-up telephone interviews.

Remote access: e-government (in)efficiencies

A major function of government is to deliver information to the public on the whole range of programmes and services available. In the past, to access such information, members of the public would interface with the appropriate information officer, a public service position within each department at all levels of government. At one time these were coveted jobs, requiring higher education, good writing and communication skills, and with some autonomy to make decisions about how best to respond to concerns raised by the general public. Under reorganisation schemes, many of these positions have been eliminated altogether. For those that remain, officers are now accessible only over the phone or online, and, in some cases, their positions may not be dedicated to a single department; instead, one individual may be responsible for responding to queries across a range of programmes or services.

Restructuring of the Canadian state has involved privatisation and contracting out along with the adoption of private sector management practices, and the language and ideology of an 'efficiency ideal.' Canadian governments are actively engaged in streamlining services through technology, offering a cornucopia of services online. Eventually Canadians will be able to conduct business or access services from all three levels of government via their computers. Within minutes, it will be possible to pay a parking ticket, arrange for a marriage license, pay taxes, change addresses, renew a driver's license, or schedule a driving test.

Canada is among the 'early leaders' in the move to e-government, alongside Australia, New Zealand, the United States and Singapore. In the USA the organisation responsible for the e-government project and transition is called 'the National Partnership for Reinventing Government.' In New Zealand, not untypically, all government agencies are required to work together to deliver better government services. The stated goal is to 'make government more relevant; it's about governments delivering better information and services; it's about people using modern technology so that they can have more of a say in the way things work.'¹ Interestingly, promoters of e-government have declared: '...e-government is about the future of democracy.' Some see this as an opportunity 'to revitalise public services; allowing us to avoid another round of 'painful, top-down restructuring.'

In New Zealand, according to the head of the government unit responsible for e-government, 'the key challenges are not technological, but cultural'. Establishing electronic facilities is not a difficult issue. However, training staff, establishing a managerial structure to implement these services and enticing the public to use them are not straightforward. From the workers' perspective, issues of pay, working conditions, job loss, and work intensification loom large.

1 Michael Cullen, quoted in <http://www.psa.org.nz/egovernment.asp>, August 2000, retrieved October 17, 2006

Early in 1997, the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services entered an agreement with Accenture to manage the Ontario Works programme, a family and children's services programme providing employment and temporary assistance to individuals across the province through the Business Transformation Project, a new service-delivery system. This system included a new IT system and revised business processes. Despite its promises of efficiency and cost savings for the public and better and quicker service for recipients, in 2002 the Provincial Auditor found that not only was the maximum payment cap of CAN\$180 million exceeded (total payments were CAN\$246 million), but there were a number of other unexplained inefficiencies in the programme (Province of Ontario, 2002: 31). In fact, the Auditor's report concluded that most of the benefits expected from the system had not been realised. Among the issues were: staff dissatisfaction over the way in which services were delivered; the complicated nature of the system; the numerous overpayments (then requiring rectification); unexplained errors and omissions; and internal control deficiencies. In general the system exposed the Ministry to risks of misappropriation of funds, and made it very difficult for staff to issue manual cheques to recipient families when errors were made (Province of Ontario, 2002: 27).

Despite these problems (resulting in poor service for Ontario families and stressful working conditions for workers), the Ontario government's website declared the programme and the use of the new IT system to be a success. The 'success' of the programme was attributed to a 5% reduction in the Ontario Works caseload between 2001 and 2002. Although a declining caseload is regarded as a success, the reporting programme does not differentiate between departures from the programme that represent a successful programme outcome, such as a recipient finding employment as a result of the Ontario Works programme's assistance, and other departures unrelated to the programme, such as moving to another province or qualifying for benefits under another programme like the Canada Pension Plan (Province of Ontario, 2002: 59). In other words, the information on this database may be neither reliable nor accurate. Many of the termination codes used by caseworkers did not reflect the circumstances of the terminations. For example, one terminated recipient was incarcerated but given a termination code indicated that the reason for termination was 'unreported income'. Others found jobs and yet were coded as 'voluntary withdrawals' for unknown reasons (Province of Ontario, 2002: 59). Overall, it seems that the processes do not account for client need, nor are they developed to provide meaningful service.

The work is organised so that when a call comes in it is assessed as a Level One, Two or Three call. Management determines the structure and directs the calls. A Level One call requires basic information (for example, 'how do I apply for a benefits programme?'). A Level Two call poses a dilemma (for example, 'I didn't receive my benefit cheque last week. What do I do?'). A Level Three call presents a challenge, and this type of call (for example, 'Why was my benefit terminated?') is sent to a more specialist worker. With the downsizing of the public sector labour force, and a high volume of calls coming in each day, this structure contributes to work overload, stress, and burnout. As a result, the number of firings has increased and claims for both short-term and long-term disability are skyrocketing. According to one trade

unionist, workers are constantly caught in a crisis-oriented and chaotic situation that is very difficult to manage psychologically. Over time, being immersed daily in such an environment leaves workers with physiological and psychological symptoms and breakdowns. The advantage of this system for the workers is that it may insulate them from direct physical abuse, although they still have to deal with abusive callers.

The process of connecting callers with computerised answers contributes to deskilling. The structure of the job and the scripted answers do not allow for further research or investigation into a particular subject area. There is no understanding of whose expertise is behind the answers. In addition, workers answer call after call on unrelated areas. While the system provides some level of efficiency in terms of citizens' needs to register complaints or to make inquiries about government services, it is inherently flawed in ways that are similar to those found in tele-health and other medical-line programmes, because of the limits of the databases and the tight parameters within which workers must respond. In tele-health, for example, workers have to answer many questions on a wide number of unrelated topics but the standard scripted answers do not always quite deal with the issues raised by callers.

New telemediated services in metropolitan areas

A major new initiative in technologically enhanced public services is the 311 government information line. The City of Toronto's 311 service will be the first of its kind in Canada, although there are at least 15 cities in the United States already operating these systems. The highly acclaimed Chicago system, a virtual 24/7 government service, claims to improve government accessibility and accountability. Similarly, in a brochure designed for distribution during a presentation by Bell Canada to City of Toronto officials, the script read:

'311 telephone service can transform the way cities deliver services, and change the way cities communicate and connect with their citizens. 311 has been successfully implemented in major U.S. cities. Now, cities across Canada – Toronto, Calgary, Halifax, Windsor, Winnipeg – are looking to adopt 311 telephone service for non-emergency local government services. GTA municipal decision-makers will need to know how 311 can enhance programme delivery, reduce costs, and increase citizen awareness of local and regional government services.'
(Canadian Urban Institute Media Release, March 5, 2004)²

Along with Bell, Motorola and Telus also have corporate interests in this project.

While the 311 services are run from call centres, issues for workers and unions spread further than those specific to call centre work. The system is pervasive and will affect all City of Toronto employees who provide direct service to the public. The 311 system is designed to handle information inquiries, place service orders, monitor service responses, and provide real-time feedback. Citizens may call in with a complaint and then call back in a specified period of time – an hour – and find out what will be done with regard to the complaint. The system will allow managers to see instantly what problems exist and will provide data to evaluate service needs and performance. Needless to say, this system will have tremendous popular appeal. With

2 Retrieved June 4, 2007 from http://www.canurb.com/media/pdf/UL_5Media.pdf

all of the tracking and monitoring involved in this system, there are, however, some concerns about privacy. Most services do not keep data about the callers, but identities may be revealed by the nature of the complaint, directing workers to a particular street, housing development, or other such marker.

The 311 service must be differentiated from emergency services and this necessitates training the public to understand the differences between the two. The City of Chicago, for example, has created a chart showing the public where to direct calls, as follows:

Call 911 for:

Burning Building

Major Emergency

I Want to Confess

Armed Stick-up

Call 311 for:

Burning Question

Minor Annoyance

I Want to Re-cycle

Garbage Pick-up

In many respects, the public will simply have to make the choice between two numbers, 311 or 911, thereby saving time when searching for the correct government service to call. When 311 is dialled, the call is transmitted through a call centre where trained operators will respond. With Toronto's diverse population, operators will be required to recognise 25 languages in order to forward the call to an operator fluent in the appropriate language. With 311 calls largely informational, accounting for about 80% of calls, the process is such that the operators will be linked to a database that will allow them to deal with a wide variety of questions, ranging from dog licenses to bylaw requirements to questions on municipal services and community emergencies. Calls related to a need for service (20% of calls) will require further action. With these calls, the operator will fill out a standard template form, assign it a number which will be given to the caller, and then send the form to the appropriate city department responsible for dealing with the complaint. Once it is dealt with, the information on its completion will be recorded as well, including how long the response took, the complaint tally for a given service, how many complaints come from a particular area of the city, and so on. These data will allow managers to study the calls and responses relative to a number of factors and then evaluate the responses and services provided.

Among the benefits of the system is the appearance of accessibility – the person calling will reach an employee and the 311 service will eliminate all automated voice services within the city. However, 311 workers must respond with scripted answers, and these scripted answers are timed, thereby once again creating an assembly line of calls and answers. Workers will be allowed a set number of seconds per call, and if they do not meet these quotas, then they will be reviewed. In addition, the scripts are static. Even though workers will have a huge database at their disposal to answer queries, the software does not lend itself to easy adaptation to individual questions in terms of the way they may be framed by the caller.

In Toronto, Bell Canada has been instrumental in reconfiguring customer services to fit with this new programme. The City receives approximately 8 million calls per year, and these calls are answered by approximately 2,700 public service staff, 500 of whom are presently located in call centres. According to reports, in cities where the 311 scheme has been implemented, the number of calls has increased dramatically. Moreover, the service is designed so that if several calls come in about a single problem

– a flooded street, for example – only one work order will be issued. Bell reports that this allows management to assign staff where they are most needed. (Canadian Urban Institute Forum, 2004). This, however, is a complex situation because the City of Toronto has been undergoing a massive (decade-long) amalgamation, and there are thousands of bylaws that have to be harmonised, and numerous collective agreements to be respected. Moreover, Toronto's amalgamation and the restructuring of city services has taken its toll on municipal workers who have experienced health problems and increased levels of stress as they have attempted to cope with their altered working conditions (McDonough, 2001).

For the unions, several issues are raised regarding the collective agreements and the protection of jobs. The plan calls for the amalgamation of call centre employees and there may be issues relating to seniority and 'bumping'³. All workers will require retraining to become familiar with the new system and the union will have to undertake negotiations regarding job reclassifications. Whilst it is planned for most call centres to be staffed during peak times, with the eight existing call centres merging, overall staff requirements will be reduced. Although management argues that the surge in the number of calls would offset a reduction in the number of public sector workers required for the job, the union's concern is that there may be a tendency to retain a lean staff and outsource the overflow of work during peak periods, as was the case in New York City. In addition, there is concern that the labour force will be downsized overall. If there are indeed duplicate services being offered throughout the city, then questions regarding layoffs or reallocation of workers are raised.

Several issues relate to the management of the work force. Some members are concerned about the escalation in monitoring practices. The evidence on some other issues is inconclusive. Interestingly, in cities where this process has already been implemented, absenteeism has been declining. Moreover, it is possible that there are new layers of managers involved, with agency liaison necessary in such an elaborate system.

Call centres and virtual service

This type of call centre work is a virtual assembly line. The work is stressful, highly monitored, scripted, and involves a fraction of the workers' skills, knowledge, and ability to interact with the public. The calls are directed one after another with no down time between calls to rest, to reflect on the issues at hand, or to prepare for subsequent calls. In federal services, at least to some degree, the managerial practices vary between different offices. There are regional disparities in that some managers allow more time between calls – up to 15 seconds – and this helps workers to set themselves up for the next call. However, in some areas, front line managers are pushing that down time to 3 to 5 seconds between calls. Even with emotionally-

³ Under some collective agreements, in cases of amalgamation, downsizing, or reorganisation, when the number of jobs decreases, workers with greater seniority 'bump out' (take the place of) those with less seniority. The greater the seniority, the more likely it is that the worker will be retained, but may be moved to a job previously held by someone with less seniority. Those workers with the least seniority may be laid off or let go altogether.

charged calls, there is pressure on the worker to complete the call quickly with no extra time for readjustment once the call is completed. All calls are supposed to be treated in a similar fashion, with management's emphasis on reducing the number of seconds per call.

Along with the mental strain, the pace and intensity of keyboard and mouse activity contribute to physical strain and injury. Moreover, employees are expected to be on the system for a minimum of six hours per day, and if they do not meet with this specification, then they must account for their time. For workers in call centres, the threshold of tolerance has been raised, with seasoned employees saying that they feel guilty for taking bathroom breaks, stretching occasionally, or looking away from the screen. The space of work is reduced to the computer as workplaces and cubicles become smaller, resulting in increasingly uncomfortable and unhealthy work environments.

While workers are admonished about time efficiencies, and although there is no overtime allowed in most offices, workers must work through until quitting time. Yet at the start of the day, start-up time is not factored into scheduling and monitoring. Even though some systems take up to 20 minutes to be up and operable, workers are still expected to 'start work on time.' Although in principle employees are allowed some preparation time, referred to as 'not ready time,' there is increasing pressure to reduce this. At present public employees are allowed approximately 15 minutes per day of 'not ready' time in which they are expected to read and review updates to policies and practices and carry out all other activities that do not directly involve work at the screen.

Monitoring is inconsistent within any level of government. For example, at the federal level, monitoring has been implemented in the Employment Insurance Centres, but it is not used for the Income Supplement Programmes (Union Conference, 2004). However, the software keeps statistics on calls and there is a general expectation by management of an 85% efficiency rate. In some offices, employees are presented with graphs showing how their ratings on call volumes and efficiency compare with others. Some offices require peer monitoring and this gives rise to conflicts, competitiveness, and difficult relations between employees. The language or other special needs of clients are not taken into consideration with respect to expectations regarding the length of time allotted per call, contributing to workers' stress, and, in some case, poor service to clients. As a result of issues relating to the monitoring and pace of work, requests for stress leave are increasing. However, employees on stress leave are often not replaced, and this creates conflict between employees as the workload of those remaining in the office escalates.

In some areas of Canada, trade unionists have noted that few annual leave requests are granted in full. In some regions, employees are not allowed more than two weeks leave at a time and may be refused leave altogether during certain periods. As a result, employees are resorting to using their sick days to get some additional time off. The pressure on workers may relate to training issues because in some areas, workers are hired on contract to fill in for those on leave. In these situations, it is reported that these workers are frequently ill-trained and they are usually hired in insufficient numbers to take up the slack. At the same time, the number of contract workers has been increasing and in some call centres there are now equal numbers of regular and short-term employees.

Despite the 'bad job' characteristics identified with work in call centres, the companies involved – Bell, Motorola, Telus and Rogers – sell this form of work as a 'career'. There are two-year college training programmes for call centre workers. On the one hand, then there is an appearance of professionalisation, but on the other hand, there is a 'dumbing down', a structure which ties workers to the software and prevents them from using their intellect and initiative when responding to calls and dealing with the public. There is incongruence between how the work is presented and workers' daily experience. With vast regional differences in Canada both in rates of employment and unemployment and in the nature of the particular labour force and labour market, in some areas call centre jobs are locally regarded as 'good jobs.' Where the economy is depressed and where there is a chronically high rate of unemployment, call centres are welcomed. In this context, a regular paycheque and some level of security are the attractive features of these jobs. When citizens contact the call centres, for the most part they are not aware that their contact may be several hundred miles away or across the country. If a question specific to a particular region is asked, then the call centre worker without that information will ask the client to call back in the hope that next time someone from that region will answer the question. This impacts upon workers' efficiency ratings – a measure watched closely by management – and ultimately on their levels of stress. In addition, there is an expectation that employees will answer all inquiries and complete all documentation while the client is on the line. In other words, the employee is not supposed to use 'not ready time' to do the paperwork.

Within the public sector, two major concerns have been raised with regard to workers' security. The first of these concerns offshoring, currently still regarded as a 'political hot potato.' With all services, there is recognition that the question of public accountability is paramount for any government and, as a result there is an unwillingness to transfer the work offshore for the time being.

The second issue of concern to public service unions is the privatisation or contracting out of government services. When services are amalgamated and standardised and the volume of work continues to grow, the economies of scale within government services attract the attention of private industry. One example of this has been the subcontracting of provincial payroll departments to companies like IBM. In smaller communities, where public service jobs are still regarded as good jobs in terms of wages and benefits, workers are engaged in struggles to maintain these jobs within the public service, and this includes call centre work. At this time, only overload is being moved off to the private sector.

However this seems set to change. Recently, the government of British Columbia (BC) signed a CAN\$133 million deal to contract out its payroll division to Telus Sourcing Solutions, a division of Vancouver-based telecommunications giant, Telus. This was the second of five major privatisation deals worth almost CAN\$1.3 billion. The latest 10-year deal involved the transfer of 150 government payroll and human resource services jobs, with the expectation that taxpayers will save CAN\$30 million over 10 years (Beatty, 2004). While government payroll workers have been offered jobs with Telus and will keep their wage scale, benefits and union contract,

many are concerned about the working conditions and managerial practices that they will encounter. This deal follows the BC government's recent contract with a Virginia-based company, Maximum Inc. (worth CAN\$324 million CA) to process Medical Service Claims. Other 10-year deals include: a CAN\$650 million deal with a division of EDS Canada to manage provincial revenue collection; a CAN\$168 million deal with IBM Canada to provide information technology support to government workers; and a CAN\$7.6 million deal with Telus Communications to manage the residential tenancy office. Furthermore, the government is considering further contracts for its purchasing division and its land management services.

Concluding remarks

With the retrenchment of the state, the drive toward increasing efficiency of service has been interpreted as a need for restructuring work and promoting telemediated methods of work, new managerial processes, privatisation, and contracting out. The trend seems to be toward 'one-stop shopping' (or Walmartisation) of government services. According to trade unionists, the government withdrawal of services has pushed management toward an ideology and practice of 'steer, not row.' This process results in an overall underevaluation of clerical work. In a study of call centre development in a civil service agency in Britain, Fisher (2004) concluded that the trade union at the agency did not anticipate the potential of call centre work to degrade and devalue labour and that trade unionism experienced a crisis as a result of this failure. With the transformations of formerly face-to-face public services into telemediated ones, unions have been thrown into uncharted waters. Moreover, there is some concern that the hiring practices within some of these new call centres may be gendered and racialised, and this practice raises new sets of issues around equity and human rights standards for unions to confront within their bargaining processes.

For workers, the process of moving toward call centres and telemediated work has raised real fears about job security, isolation, workplace alienation, and intensified work environments. In some cases, the new forms of discipline may be regarded as deliberate anti-union strategies. Workers who experience difficulty in keeping up with the pace of work are dissuaded from filing formal complaints. The new pressures that are experienced by workers are echoed from the perspective of the general public in an increasing number of complaints about the deteriorating quality of services.

The extensive use of call centres and telemediated work is part of a process of workplace restructuring and the deployment of new working arrangements within the public sector. Delivering public services through new technologies extends management practices that alter working conditions, security, and rights. This opens up insights into the changing role of the state as an employer. These new workplace policies impact on the safe and efficient delivery of services and challenge trade unions to refocus their collective bargaining strategies as well as raising public concerns about the quality of service delivery and the citizenship rights of Canadians.

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