Resisting Call Centre Work: The Aliant Strike and Convergent Unionism in Canada

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ABSTRACT

Countering the more placid depictions of call-centre work on offer from academic literature, this paper illuminates the labour antagonisms currently being produced within this growing form of employment. It brings into sharper focus one of the ways in which call centre workers are organising to protect and their interests, by describing their participation in the emerging model of ‘convergent’ trade unionism of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP) and their 2004 strike against the Canadian telecommunications company Aliant. The five-month strike was provoked by a set of processes that characterised the transformation of the Canadian telecommunications sector in the 1990s, including the privatisation of public telephone companies, corporate convergence, and the restructuring of the labour process at the telecommunications companies that emerged. Drawing on the descriptions offered by a group of call-centre workers who are members of Local 506 of the CEP, the paper focuses on the transformation of the Aliant customer contact labour process from its ‘help-desk’ functions towards conditions prevailing within non-unionised outsourced call centres across New Brunswick, and recounts the 2004 strike. It concludes by assessing the significance of these events for unionised call-centre workers in the Canadian telecommunications sector and reflecting on how convergent unionism might be extended to include non-unionised workers at outsourced call centres across the region.

introduction

Broadly optimistic discussions of call-centre labour, emerging primarily from business and management perspectives but also within fields such as occupational psychology, have tended to steer clear of discussing industrial conflict in these new workplaces (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2007; Frenkel et al, 1998, 1999; Holman 2004; Srivastava and Theodore, 2006). In so doing, this research has offered a view in which neither exploitation nor resistance is prominent in the apparently placid world of call-centre work. More critical perspectives have, over the last decade, focused their attention on the labour processes within call centres, offering an increasingly textured portrait of the insecurity, routinisation, surveillance, and emotional labour characteristic of one of digital capitalism’s fastest-growing professions (Baldry, Bain & Taylor, 1998; Callaghan & Thompson, 2001; Head, 2003; Mulholland, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 1999).
Labour process approaches have helped illuminate the contested power relations between employers and workers in call centres, and have also begun to produce much-needed research into moments of resistance by workers (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Taylor & Bain, 2005; Mulholland, 2004). There remains a great deal of work to do, however, to further academic analysis of the different forms that collective resistance by call-centre workers is taking, to explore the relationship between such resistance and the labour processes that provoke it, and to evaluate the effectiveness of these forms. Such concerns are central to a small but growing academic literature on call-centre work that is the product of research carried out in an explicitly collaborative manner with the collectives, associations, and unions formed by and/or representing call-centre workers (Guard, Steedman & Garcia Orgales, 2007; Rainie and Drummond, 2006; Stevens & Lavin 2007), research that aims both to extend the power of those organisations and to provide a counterbalance to the more antiseptic representations of call-centre work on offer within the academic literature.

Adding itself to such research, this paper describes the 2004 strike against the Canadian telecommunications company Aliant by call-centre employees and other workers who were members of Local 506 of the Communications, Energy, and Paperworkers Union of Canada (CEP). It shows how the five-month strike was provoked by a set of processes that characterised the transformation of the Canadian telecommunications sector in the 1990s, including the privatisation of public telephone companies, corporate convergence, and the restructuring of the labour process at the newly privatised telecommunications companies. Soon after its formation out of a merger between four privatised telephone companies in Atlantic Canada, Aliant began to experiment with the adoption of new technology, facility closures, layoffs, the electronic transfer of work, and the repurposing of workers for new portions of the production process. In the process, as is described below by its employees, the company’s in-house telephone help desk functions and the clerical labour enabling them were restructured towards the intensified rhythms, tightly-controlled customer interactions, and increased surveillance that characterised outsourced call centres in the region.

Workers at Aliant in Moncton, New Brunswick were familiar with the labour conditions of these emergent digital workplaces however, and were not keen to be subject to them. By one estimate, one out of every twenty of their fellow New Brunswickers in the workforce is employed in a call centre (CBC, 2008) in a province where the communicative labour sustaining corporations such as AOL, UPS, IBM and Air Canada has long been a focus of economic development. Karen Buckley, who provides technical support at Aliant, describes the impact of the industry on those close to her:

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1 The process of convergence within the media and telecommunications industries has been a key conceptual lens for critical political-economic analyses of the sector (Winseck, 1998; McKercher, 2002; Mosco, 2008). More recently, the concept has been applied to labour organisations as well (Chaisson, 1996; Mosco & McKercher, 2006).

2 The companies involved in the merger were NBTel (New Brunswick), Island Telecom Inc (Prince Edward Island), Maritime Telegraph and Telephone Company (Nova Scotia), and NewTel Enterprises Limited (Newfoundland and Labrador). In early 2000 Bell Canada Enterprises increased its controlling interest in the new firm to 42 % (Rideout, 2003: 119), and by 2004 its stake had risen to 53 % (Wong, 2004).
The call-centre industry is getting a bad name because of the stress level that is added to the individual who’s working that particular job. The expectation that one person is going to extrapolate that kind of quality from interacting with a person on the telephone… it’s unreasonable, it’s unbelievable, and it’s landed so many people in stress leaves from work that the unemployment office actually has a way to deal with them. You know that there’s an issue when you go to unemployment and tell them that you’re out on stress leave, and they’ll send you back to school to re-educate you to do something else, provided you never ever, ever, ever, go back to call-centre industry. Because my daughter took it. Yeah, they’ll pay her [Employment Insurance] for the whole time she’s in school provided she never goes back to a call centre. She was working at Client Logic. And she was their top salesman for 2 consecutive months prior to leaving on stress! And they were still hounding her because her calls weren’t less than 12 minutes. She was their number one salesperson. (Buckley, Karen, personal interview, April 6, 2006)

This paper brings into sharper focus one of the ways in which call-centre workers are organising to protect their interests by describing their participation in the emerging model of convergent trade unionism (Mosco & McKercher, 2006), the organisational response adopted by North American unions such as the CEP, the Telecommunications Workers Union, and the Communication Workers of America to confront the ongoing turbulence within the telecommunications industry. This unsteady scenario has seen convergence of ownership across previously distinct industry sectors (eg cable and telephony), supported by technological convergence (towards digitisation as a common language), through which production is increasingly coordinated across emergent conglomerates like Sprint, Bell, Telus, and Aliant (Winseck, 1998; McKercher, 2002; Mosco, 2008). In an attempt to harness these processes, trade unions of communication workers have merged with others nationally in order to produce larger and stronger organisations that are capable of confronting labour restructuring and the outsourcing of unionised positions to non-unionised companies. As we shall see, in-house, unionised call-centre workers within the telecommunication industries have played a key role in this process.

In what follows, mindful of the fact that a great deal of research on call centres has offered portraits of these workplaces in which they are abstracted from their political and economic contexts (Ellis & Taylor, 2006: 108), the paper begins by describing the restructuring of New Brunswick’s political economy during the 1990s and the processes of convergence that both created Aliant and gave it its union. I then focus on the transformation of the labour processes in the company’s functions from those of

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3 In the United States, examples from the telecommunications sector include Verizon’s purchase of MCI in 2005, the $16 Billion USD acquisition of AT&T by regional phone giant SBC Communications Inc. and the $35 billion USD merger of Sprint Corp and Nextel Communications (Noguchi, 2005). The effect on telecommunications workers and their unions has been devastating. According to Jeffrey H. Keefe, a researcher at the Economic Policy Institute (a Washington research institute), from 1998 to 2003 traditional wire-line companies in the United States eliminated 15.5% of their jobs, which paid 26% more than those in the cable industry, where employment grew by 22.6% (cited in Belson, 2004). Overall, the number of telecommunications workers represented by a union fell 23% between 2000 and 2004 to 273,000 according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (cited in Belson, 2004).
a ‘help desk’ towards the conditions prevailing within non-unionised, outsourced call centres across New Brunswick, and then move on to examine the 2004 strike. I conclude by assessing the significance of this restructuring for unionised call-centre workers in the telecommunications sector, and reflecting on how convergent unionism might be extended to include non-unionised workers in outsourced call centres across the region.

The research draws on 14 open-ended interviews conducted with Aliant call-centre workers and CEP members in Moncton, New Brunswick in April 2006. These workers had all been present at the telecommunications company when it was NBTel, and had thus experienced the merger that would turn it into Aliant, their own unionisation through the CEP, the ongoing restructuring at the company, and the 2004 strike. They were therefore able to offer invaluable testimony concerning these events and processes. Their accounts were supplemented by a review of papers from archived issues of daily newspapers from the four Atlantic provinces describing the transformations at the company and the 2004 strike, by CEP and Aliant newsletters, press releases and collective agreements, by various documents and decisions of the Canadian Industrial Relations Board (CIRB), and by business press and other papers dealing with the development of the call-centre industry in the Maritimes, particularly in New Brunswick.

Restructuring of New Brunswick’s political economy

The ‘New Economic Strategy’ enacted in New Brunswick during the 1990s by Frank McKenna’s Liberal government rapidly transformed the composition of labour in the province. The rationale supporting this restructuring was simple: if the province’s traditional forms of employment were dying, then a wave of new opportunities for profit existed in the form of an emergent call-centre sector, which, with the right incentives, could be lured to the province to replace the jobs lost on the fish-packing line, at the railway yards, and in forestry. Bolstered by its close relationship with the provincial government, telecom provider NBTel invested heavily in fibre optic and digital switching technologies. The result was a state-of-the-art-telecommunications infrastructure that offered potentially seamless integration between the headquarters of major American and Canadian companies and their New Brunswick operations (UNCTAD, 2005: 197).

As Tom Good and Joan McFarland (2005:104) have documented in their research on the development of call centres in the province, by 1999, NBTel was offering to cover virtually all of the costs associated with telecommunications hardware and software, as well as its maintenance and regular upgrading, for companies that were considering relocating their call-centre operations to the Province.

If NBTel offered companies the cutting edge technology, the provincial government took care of providing the workforce and financial incentives (Balka, 2002; Buchanan & Koch-Schulte, 2000). The most important features of the New Brunswick ‘business climate’ promoted by McKenna’s government to prospective buyers were one of the lowest unionisation rates and one of the highest unemployment rates in Canada. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Liberals went well beyond the standard advertising of the

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4 As McKenna promoted his strategy for the province, a full 12% of the active labour force (roughly 40,000 people) was officially unemployed, a figure that did not even include part-time or casual workers seeking full-time work (Good & McFarland, 2005: 99).
region however, manifesting itself in enthusiastic pronouncements in promotional literature regarding the weakness of organised labour in the province. As the New Brunswick Department of Economic Development and Tourism website proclaimed in 1999:

*The industry that reflects call-centre activities the most is the communications industry and [in that industry] New Brunswick has the lowest rate of unionisation in Canada… NBTel is the only telephone company in Canada with non-unionised clerical employees … There has never been an industry attempt to unionise [call centres in the province].* (quoted in Good & McFarland, 2005: 111).

There is some irony in the fact that the non-unionised NBTel clerical employees in question would soon become a barometer of the deteriorating labour relations at the company, unionising in 2001 and striking in 2004. In the years before this labour unrest, McKenna’s Liberals went about the business of expanding the existing pool of skilled, non-unionised, and chronically unemployed workers with call-centre skills. During the 1990s, educational initiatives were enacted that were designed to ensure the continued reproduction of the call-centre workforce in the decades to come. Computer literacy became mandatory for high school graduates, and both public and private institutions began to offer call-centre training programs in the province (UNCTAD 2005, 197).

In addition to state-of-the-art infrastructure and an obedient workforce, McKenna’s government also promised billions in forgivable loans to lure call-centre operations to New Brunswick. Companies were enticed, and by one count at least 35 call centres were established in the province between 1991 and 1996 (Jaimet, 2006). By 2002 in Moncton alone there were 43 call centres employing an estimated 6,000 workers (Warson, 2002).5

The labour process at Aliant was deeply affected by the broader transformations occurring outside of it. The 1999 merger produced the third-largest telecommunications company in Canada and the largest in the region, worth $3 billion and employing 9,000 people (Aliant, 1999). Newly convergent companies like Aliant quickly compensated for the revenue lost from their former long-distance monopolies by offering new services like wireless, Internet access, and satellite television. In a move that was enabled by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission through its loosening of service requirements, corporate re-engineering programmes gutted the workforces of these companies and, in the process, carried out a sustained attack on their unions (Niemeijer, 2004; Shniad, 2005; 2007). Aliant was no exception. After the merger, it closed its operator service operations in Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island, centralised significant parts of its other operations, downsized its workforce by several hundred employees and transferred a major part of its Network Surveillance operations and Buildings Real Estate management to its parent company, Bell Canada.

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5 By 2004, roughly one-quarter of all employment in the Canadian call-centre industry was in Atlantic Canada, most notably in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia (this compared with the region’s 7% share of total employment both in the service industries as a whole and in all industries combined (Statistics Canada, 2005). In New Brunswick 22,000 people (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News, 2008) currently work in an estimated 100 call centres, producing $1 billion yearly for the provincial economy (Kitchener-Waterloo Record, 2006). This has allowed New Brunswick to become part of a ‘nearshoring’ trend that belies simple models describing the offshoring of communicative labour as flowing solely from developed to developing countries (Austen, 2004; Mosco, 2006).
By 2000, however, Aliant was having to face its own version of the convergent trade unions that were organising workers across the communications, information, and media sectors. The union representing its workers had pursued its own growth strategy since the 1990s, merging with two other unions to create the CEP in the early part of that decade. This union convergence was supported by the Canada Industrial Relations Board (CIRB) which followed the state of labour relations at Aliant closely in the aftermath of the merger. Prior to the amalgamation, the Atlantic companies contained nine bargaining units. The CEP represented craft, clerical and operator units in Newfoundland and Labrador at NewTel (Local 410) and Prince Edward Island at IslandTel (Local 401), but only craft and operator bargaining units in New Brunswick at NBTel (Local 506). In Nova Scotia, the historically more militant Atlantic Communications and Technical Workers Union (ACTWU), that, by all accounts, had the best collective agreement, represented employees in all three occupations. The workers studied in this paper were the only non-unionised clerical/call-centre employees of these four companies prior to the Aliant merger and the subsequent proceedings before the CIRB.

On the heels of the merger, the CEP began its third campaign to organise clerical workers in New Brunswick in March, 2000. After a card-signing meeting with the majority of the workers, the CEP applied to the CIRB for certification in August, 2000. Aliant sought a review of the bargaining unit structure in the same year, requesting the consolidation of the nine bargaining units in an application to the CIRB. The existing bargaining units agreed to the merger, and, by order of the Bureau, in 2001 a single bargaining unit was formed, representing all of Aliant’s unionised workers. The bargaining agent for the new unit was to be the Council of Atlantic Telecommunication Unions (CATU), formed through an agreement between the CEP and the ACTWU. The CIRB thus granted Aliant its wish, yet in its decision the Board also ordered the inclusion in the newly convergent bargaining unit (now some 4,300 workers strong) of the nearly 800 clerical employees in New Brunswick. Sensing that the newly unionised call-centre workers could send an important signal to other workers on the province’s digital assembly lines, Vice-President of the CEP’s Atlantic Region, Max Michaud,

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6 The CEP’s ‘communications section was born in the early 1970s when the Canadian contingent of the Communications Workers of America opted for secession from its US-based parent (McKercher, 2002).
7 Why these workers were not unionised before the Aliant merger is unclear. The CEP had tried to unionise them at least twice previously in the 1990s, without success. As one worker described it: ‘We were presented with it, and we were asked to join the union throughout my career at least twice before we actually did. […] And we voted on it, and voted against it because whatever [the other unionised clerical/call-centre workers in other provinces] had, we also got. Without paying the union dues or anything like that. I mean in terms of money and hours of work […]. As far as protection and stuff like that, we didn’t have what they had, but we didn’t feel the need to have it, at that point in time.’ (Aliant worker 1, personal interview, April 6, 2006)
Frequently cited reasons for this lack of unionisation were either that clerical workers at NBTel were suspicious of established trade unions, or that they had a reasonably good relationship with management, or both. Whether the suspicion arose from personal experience or elsewhere, it often included views that trade unions were overly bureaucratic or inclined to focus on petty aspects of the labour-management relationship. Others pointed to what they suggested was New Brunswick’s lack of a strong labour history, or to the strong work ethic of its inhabitants. One worker’s comments are typical: ‘It’s lacking compared to the other provinces. Especially in Moncton, because it’s more of a service city, not an industry [city]. If you go up north, where the economy runs on paper mills and other wood products, they’re all unionised right, so union[s] are a lot stronger in the Northern economy’. (Aliant worker 2, personal interview, April 6th, 2006).
marked the decision by suggesting that these were ‘among the first-ever call-centre workers to join a union in Canada’ and that the CEP hoped their unionisation would ‘open the door for others who desperately need the protection of a union’ (CEP, 2001). In February of 2002, the arbitrator produced an interim collective agreement until a new agreement could be reached.

The transformation of the customer contact labour process at Aliant

In the literature surrounding the merger, whether in union publications, press releases, CIRB decisions or quotes from representatives of Aliant, the call-centre workers who form the focus of this paper are most often defined as ‘clerical’ workers. This differentiates them from ‘operator’ services (who, despite the automation affecting their jobs still carry out a contemporary iteration of the roles they have played since the emergence of telephony) and ‘craft’ or ‘outside’ workers, who make repairs, install new services at homes and businesses, etc. At the same time, clerical employees at Aliant are increasingly referred to (including by themselves) as ‘call-centre workers’, a name that registers the changes in their labour process unleashed by the transformations described above.

Telecommunications companies increasingly need employees who can interact with customers over the phone in both an efficient and affectively productive manner. These workers must tell customers about the packages on offer, bargain with them, or sell them more expensive packages than they already have, but their role does not end with sales. A range of technical difficulties can emerge once the customers are signed up, and these workers must also act as the front line solvers of such problems, helping the customer keep the services running and, if possible, avoiding putting the company to the expense of a physical visit to the location. Clerical/call-centre workers must also coordinate the visits of outside workers to homes or businesses for repairs or to install services if this is necessary.

These tasks require a set of skills that are linguistic, communicative, and affective. In Arlie Hochschild’s classic formulation (2004), they are prime examples of the ‘emotional’ labour increasingly in demand in contemporary economies. This labour is far from unskilled: not only is the generic human faculty of communication put to work at Aliant, but it must also by necessity be paired with the ability to speak two languages in a bilingual province. Specific cultural knowledge is a key part of creating an affective bond when workers speak to customers from their province:

> I get a lot of calls from the French communities also, and I know pretty much all the different areas, so I can relate to customers a lot… sometimes they have different dialects from different areas, and you can recognise what region they’re from, and right away you can empathise with them (Philippe Roy, personal interview, April 5th, 2006).

8 The province’s entrenched bilingualism has made New Brunswick a strong candidate for the outsourcing of call-centre work. A legacy of the Acadians who trickled back into New Brunswick after their 1755 expulsion by the British, 45% of call-centre workers in the province speak both English and French, a factor which makes them attractive employees for Canadian or American companies who need to manage their interaction with bilingual Canadian customers.
This extends, as Sandy Brideau (who has moved from clerical to craft duties at Aliant) suggested, to knowledge of regional dialects composed of a mixture of English and French:

*Some people mix their French and English, and if you’re only French or only English you’re not able to understand that type of language. You need to be able to switch from French to English rapidly, because a lot of people do that.*

*(Brideau, personal interview, April 6th, 2006)*

Aliant clerical/call-centre workers are also highly educated, with the majority having a post-secondary degree. This is described by Philippe Roy who entered the company shortly before the merger: ‘I saw a lot of faces that I recognised from university. […] They had] different backgrounds, lots of backgrounds: commerce, arts, science, engineering’ (Roy, ibid). Not only is communication put to work at the company, but many of the affective abilities gained outside Aliant become the raw ingredients of the labour process, whether these derive from the public education system, the service sector at large, or even a simple aptitude for dealing with people. When asked what management expected of their interaction with callers, workers frequently underscored the affective demands of their job: ‘They want me to build a relationship with a customer, definitely’ said one worker (Aliant worker 2, personal interview, April 6th, 2006). This dimension of the job was stressed to Donovan Richard from the beginning: ‘I got to Aliant, [and] they said, ‘we can train for computers, but not for customer service’ (Donovan Richard, personal interview, April 4th, 2006).

Since the merger, this complex skill set has been pushed closer to its limits by management in an attempt to extract as much labour from these workers as possible. At the same time as they are expected to develop productive relationships with the customer, balancing several responsibilities and finding solutions to their problems, virtually all of the workers interviewed suggested that, since the merger, Aliant has subjected these responsibilities to a different series of logics and rhythms, ones that are much closer to those of outsourced call centres in the rest of the province. Sandy Brideau charted the transformation of their labour process through management discourse, suggesting that prior to 2001 management referred to their labour as ‘help desk work’. As he pointed out:

*There is] a big difference between a help desk and a call centre… And then, three years after, they sent an email [and] for the first time it says ‘…the call-centre working hours.’ So we said, ‘what happened with [the] help desk?’ ‘Ahhh [they said]… by the way, no, we’re a call centre. (Brideau, personal interview, April 6th, 2006)*

Brideau further notes that the term ‘call centre’ entered the management lexicon ‘shortly after we signed our union card’ (Brideau, ibid). Indeed Aliant management could not have been unaware, as it began to implement these changes, of the well-entrenched methods of disciplining call-centre labour – and the lack of unionisation – reigning within the typical outsourced call centre in New Brunswick.

The transition from help desk to call centre has been much more than a matter of semantics for the workers, however. Philippe Roy suggests that since the merger…

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9 This is consistent with call-centre workers across the province, 70% of whom are estimated to have a post-secondary education (Good & McFarland, 2005: 106).
his work is ‘very structured: call flows, you know, productivity and sales quotas and everything. It is very call-centre structured now, more than it was before’ (Roy, ibid). For most of the call-centre positions among the Moncton CEP 506 members, this increasingly involves processes that unite the workers with their non-unionised colleagues across the province in a most unwelcome form of convergence: greater electronic monitoring and discipline based on performance. As Roy suggests, ‘…if the performance isn’t there, they notice fairly quickly’ (Roy, ibid). When asked about this increased surveillance at work, the Aliant workers were unanimous in their dislike of it. Keenan Richard described it as like having ‘an extra pair of eyes behind you all the time’ (Richard, Keenan, personal interview, April 4th, 2006).

The upshot of this shift toward an outsourced call-centre labour process, the workers suggested, has been a decreasing ability for them to affectively connect with and adequately assist the customer, a tension that marks the call-centre industry at large (Taylor & Bain, 2005). Many of the CEP 506 workers immediately connected this problem with the kinds of work rhythms their non-unionised counterparts are facing across New Brunswick. As evidenced by the quotation from Karen Buckley at the beginning of this paper, Aliant workers are very familiar with these, as many have direct experience at other call centres or have friends and relatives who have worked in them.

While there are increasing similarities between their labour processes and those of their non-unionised colleagues, Aliant employees still retain a greater ability to resist such pressures when they impede them from carrying out their responsibilities as they feel they ought. For several interviewees, personal standards of professionalism supersede management’s demands, and, doubtless bolstered by the fact that there is a union behind them, the workers are sometimes able to take matters into their own hands:

…with the Quality Care they want you to talk on average X amount of minutes on each call, but to me numbers aren’t as important. I do very well on certain things where I know, but there are certain things that they’re going to ask and I know I won’t do as well as they want me to do, but I still take the time anyways. […] I don’t think they can fire me for taking the time to help the customer, so I just take the time! (Aliant worker 2, ibid)

Although they resisted such changes to their labour process, the greater Taylorisation in the work of some call-centre workers was still not evident to all the workers or present across the board at Aliant. Within some forms of clerical labour, such as technical support, expertise still resided with workers rather than being embedded in the software. When asked whether she had more knowledge of her job than her supervisors, Buckley (who provides support for IPTV and web hosting) responded:

Yeah! Far more! They remind me of a group of people playing with toy soldiers. All the little plastic men are lined up, but they don’t have a clue what’s going on in any of their heads. (Buckley, Karen, ibid)

Donovan Richard experiences this as well:

…probably because our group is a little bit more experienced, we’ve been there a long time… the supervisors we have now don’t really know what we do. (Richard, Donovan, ibid)
These are some of the key areas in which, amid a transforming labour process, the contest for control between management and call-centre labour at Aliant was played out. The early changes towards an outsourced call-centre model were warnings of the newly converged company’s approach to its unionised employees. By 2003, Aliant management was determined to break the convergent union that had been created in the wake of employer convergence and to restructure the labour process as it saw fit.

The 2004 Aliant Strike

If Aliant management had begun to tinker with the labour process of a newly converged corporation, the labour strife to come would be an early example of a convergent strike. The 2004 conflict was a test of the soundness of the CEP’s organisational decisions in a rapidly changing economic landscape. In an age of outsourcing, success for it and CATU would primarily mean maintaining the kind of job security for Aliant employees that telecommunication workers had achieved under what Vanda Rideout has called Canada’s ‘permeable Fordist’ telecommunications regime established in the post-World War II period (2003:3-46), as well as defending the traditional Defined Benefit pension system against the plan offered by Aliant. On the other side of the divide, as Niemeijer (2004:6) has suggested, management was focused on ‘cutting costs by reducing workforces, eliminating restrictive contract language, and reducing benefits.’

On December 1, 2003, Aliant workers across Atlantic Canada voted by a 92.5% margin to give their negotiating committee the authority to call a strike. Aliant and CATU had been squaring off for three years since the Bargaining Council was formed, and by the time the strike vote was called Aliant workers had not had a contract in almost two years. Despite the strike vote, Aliant was unwilling to offer CATU what it wanted on pensions and outsourcing. Negotiations broke down, and, in March 2004, the CEP negotiators secured a new strike mandate following Aliant’s offer.

As the strike approached, Aliant management played up its ability to circumvent strike action by a combination of automation and managers carrying out the jobs of striking workers. ‘We’ve got pretty good systems, a good network,’ suggested the company’s public affairs manager Brenda Reid, ‘we don’t expect if there is a work stoppage that it will have any major impact on the network itself’ (quoted in Macphee, 2004). The company was training over 1,800 of its managers to fill in for call-centre workers, and a strike would see the company pit its managers and automated telephone networks against the workers’ withdrawal of their labour.

For its part, the CEP’s strategy became clear: while it would probably not be able to shut down Aliant’s networks entirely, it might cause enough of a slowdown to routine maintenance, repair, and support functions to jeopardise the influx of new

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The 2004 strike was part of a cycle of struggles in the telecommunications sector in Canada. As the strife broke out, trade unions and convergent telecommunications companies across the country were paying close attention; indeed the issues on the table in several situations appeared to be remarkably similar. In Ontario and Quebec, 7,500 CEP technicians were locked in contract talks with Bell Canada, with similar issues (outsourcing, pensions and wages) coming up as key. On the west coast, the TWU and Telus were in the middle of a four-year dispute. Thousands of TWU members had been without a contract for years, and eyes were turned to Atlantic Canada to assess what might happen when push came to shove.
customers, diverting them towards competitors and putting a squeeze on Aliant’s profits. Considering the size of Aliant’s operations and the fact that it was in the midst of restructuring, the strategy was by no means far-fetched. This would put enormous pressure on Aliant’s managers, who would have to ‘keep the lights on’ as CEP President Brian Payne suggested (cited in Canadian Press, 2004), for an estimated two million residential customers and 80,000 businesses across Atlantic Canada.

On April 23rd, pickets went up across four provinces. In Moncton, the newly unionised workers were facing the unknown: ‘90% of the people […] going out the door had no idea what a strike was, they’d never gone on strike before’ (Brideau, ibid). While the strike was mostly played out within the framework imposed by the Canadian Labour Code, it produced a great deal of friction across the Maritime Provinces. In a tactic that would feature prominently in the Telus strike on the west coast, Aliant employed private security guards to monitor and intimidate the striking workers: 'We did get harassed quite a bit by the security guards. Several tactics, fear tactics, were used and stuff like that. So it was kind of rough, you know, they showed us our home address on a piece of paper, just to rub it in that we know where you live. They delivered letters at my home about conduct and stuff, they were saying I was harassing people and all that which, you know, is kind of scary…' (Aliant worker 3, personal interview, April 6th, 2006)

Tension was high between strikers and managers, who belonged to the same union but were in different bargaining units, meaning that the latter crossed picket lines to carry out the former’s work. Assault charges were laid against picketers in several locations as the hustle and bustle of strike activity soon took on an analogous life in the courts (Bouzane, 2004). Since work was being outsourced to call-centre workers at non-unionised companies and installations and repairs continued across the city of Moncton, CEP strikers also used roaming pickets: ‘people got in cars and looked for vans to picket. And then there was the Xwave parking lot, because they were doing our job’ Buckley recalls (Buckley, ibid).

An old staple of labour struggles, sabotage, also surfaced during the spring and summer. In May, an Aliant automated systems building in Holyrood, Newfoundland suffered fire and smoke damage to its exterior and an Aliant vehicle had its tyres slashed (Bouzane, 2004). In June, primary and backup cables in the Aliant network were severed, disrupting telephone, cellular and Internet services on the Avalon Peninsula and Corner Brook, Newfoundland. The same tactic was also employed on the east coast of Nova Scotia (Bradbury Bennett, 2004a).

As the strike hit the two-month mark, the parties met in order to resume negotiations, but these exploratory talks ended after two days (Cronk & Macdonald, 2004a). With strike pay offering little more than $200 per week (Bradbury Bennett, 2004b), there was growing pressure both on the strikers and the union coffers. At

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11 Aliant and CATU ended up in the Newfoundland Supreme Court in July after a riot squad was called to the St. John’s Aliant to watch over about 200 striking workers who were holding up managers trying to enter the building (Bouzane, 2004).

12 Xwave is a division of Bell Aliant offering ‘business solutions’, or, more colloquially, call-centre services.

13 At the end of July, national treasurer Andre Foucault stated that the CEP had spent roughly $3 million on the local union’s strike fund (Bradbury Bennett, 2004b).
roughly the same time, the TWU contributed $1 million to the Halifax-based Atlantic Communication and Technical Workers’ Union, an early sign that there were financial difficulties at the Nova Scotia organisation.

When Bell Canada technicians in Ontario and Quebec accepted a contract their bargaining committee had advised them to reject in mid-August (one which fell short of CATU’s own bargaining objectives), it seemed to be an indication that they did not see things proceeding well in Atlantic Canada. Workers in Ontario and Quebec agreed to a contract that allowed outsourcing and also agreed to Bell Canada’s pension plan demands. Their capitulation provoked a special member update from CATU’s bargaining team urging strikers at Aliant not to be discouraged by what had happened elsewhere (Cronk & Macdonald 2004b).

By mid-summer, the strike was cutting into Aliant’s bottom line. The company’s second-quarter financial results at the end of July revealed that the strike had cost it around $21 million, with a drop of $9 million in revenues and a $12 million increase in costs (CBC News, 2004). Considering that it was relieved of the burden of paying its unionised workers, these figures support the idea that Aliant was prepared to pay a hefty price for future control over its labour processes. With the strike approaching its fifth month, in August, provincial Labour Minister, Joe Fontana announced that a federal mediator would try to resolve the dispute. The parties met with Elizabeth MacPherson in Halifax on August 30th, and four days later it was announced that a tentative agreement had been reached.

Not all was peaceful within the CATU alliance, however. As its workers were reviewing the tentative deal, friction was developing between the CEP and the ACTWU. The Nova Scotia ACTWU members were far from happy with the Aliant offer, in particular, it appears, with the outsourcing contract language and how long it would take them to reach wage parity with Aliant workers doing the same work in other provinces. As the ratification of the agreement by union members was pending, the CEP withdrew its support for the 1,800 Nova Scotia workers through its strike fund. ‘The CEP has really kicked us while we are down – our union brothers’ one ACTWU member lamented, ‘in my opinion, they are trying to force a yes vote’ (cited in Halifax Chronicle-Herald, 2004). Indeed, with the ACTWU on the rocks financially, Nova Scotia workers were facing the prospect of receiving no strike pay if they rejected the tentative deal and continued striking. While some Nova Scotians may have felt the offer was the best they could get from the company, the sentiment of betrayal appears to have been widespread. ‘It was [a] real blow,’ said Nova Scotia dispatcher Joan Ross, ‘my own personal feeling is I think we should be contacting the Auto Workers and Teamsters, and saying: “we’re here, take us” And leave the CEP in the dust’ (cited in McLaughlin, 2004). CEP Local 410 president, Tom Retieffe added his voice to the chorus: ‘The contracting-out language that we enjoyed for years in Newfoundland has been completely left out of the collective agreement and all we have now is basically a no-layoff clause…’ (quoted in Bradbury Bennett, 2004c). Indeed while unionised workers at Aliant are protected by a series of measures against layoffs, or ‘workforce reduction’ as it is referred to in the collective agreement (Aliant and CATU, 2004), they may still be shifted to other positions so long as they are unionised ones. In addition,
once a unionised worker leaves or retires, the position does not have to be replaced with another unionised worker.

The five-month strike came to an end when workers at Aliant accepted the contract offer with a 76% ‘yes’ vote. The last act of the strike was the disappearance of the ACTWU, which in January of the following year opted to merge with the CEP because of its financial difficulties. The strike that began with corporate convergence thus ended with an intensification of trade union convergence.

With employees back at work across the four provinces, Aliant immediately resumed its restructuring, albeit within the boundaries of the new collective agreement. That September, the company announced the closure of a walk-in phone centre in St. John’s (Vaccaro, 2004). In November 2005 it announced that it would outsource 129 permanent call-centre jobs (including technical support for dial-up Internet, high-speed Internet, telephone repair and mobility repair) to a non-unionised company and drop around 100 temporary employees from the payroll (Tutton, 2005). The positions were shifted from call centres in St. John’s, Halifax and Moncton to the non-unionised ICT Group, whose two call centres in Miramichi already provided the help-desk service for a portion of Aliant’s dial-up Internet customers.

The company’s strategy since then appears to be one of moving to outsource its call-centre support work and keeping its call-centre sales work in-house. For many of the clerical/call-centre workers in Moncton, this has meant regular upheaval as portions of the labour process are spun off to other companies:

I was doing the technical support at first for the dialup portion of it; then they got me into high-speed, and then the company decided to move their dial-up to a contractor. So we lost the dial-up part that we were doing, and we were doing high-speed up until now and now they’ve outsourced the high-speed as well. So all of the technical side has been outsourced. And they’re keeping the unionised force for service. (Worker 2, ibid)

For the call-centre workers at Aliant, the ongoing experimentation means that they face permanent uncertainty at work: ‘[Management’s] always telling us, “you know, you guys can always be moved around to other trouble resolution groups”’, says Donovan Richard (Richard, ibid). Ferdinand Leblanc sums up the indeterminacy of their labour conditions: ‘you have a job, but not necessarily the job that you want to have’ (Leblanc, Ferdinand, personal interview, April 3rd, 2006). For those who remain in technical support, like Richard, work has been further intensified: ‘same workload, just less people’ as he says (ibid).

After the strike, Aliant employed about 8,400 people, and its 2004 revenues were more than $2 billion with profits of $137 million (CEP, 2005). In March of 2006 the company announced further restructuring in the formation of Bell Aliant. This entailed Bell Canada Enterprises (BCE) taking over Atlantic Canada’s wireless operations, with Bell Aliant now being responsible for the traditional wireline operations in Ontario and Quebec, a move that boosted employment numbers to 10,000. According to current CEP Atlantic Region Vice-President Ervan Cronk, Bell was ‘hiving off the growth part of the company’ and leaving the more imperilled parts to Bell Aliant, and therefore to its unionised employees (cited in Tutton, 2006). This restructuring seems likely to continue.
the trend of outsourcing and job losses at Aliant. As one telecommunications analyst suggested: ‘they’re going to fracture the company and move employees around. Clearly some of the unionised employees will change unions, seniority is going to be affected and over time there will be attrition’ (cited in Tutton, 2006). Bell’s move could mean further union convergence as well. Bell Aliant will take over the management of 750 unionised employees in rural Ontario and Quebec, represented by three separate unions, including the CEP, the Canadian Telephone Employees Association and the Teamsters.

Overall, Bell Aliant’s strategy towards its union appears clear. While for the moment it must keep on unionised positions, over the long term it will be able to reduce the union’s presence steadily through attrition as people retire or leave their jobs. Donovan Richard neatly captures the feeling this outsourcing strategy evokes: ‘so you see, our department got smaller, and they don’t replace people, they just let it go smaller and go smaller until at one point there won’t be anybody left’ (Richard, Donovan, ibid).

One of the last questions asked to the interviewees was how secure they felt their positions to be. While responses were not completely unanimous, most employees felt like Aliant Worker 6 who replied ‘not secure at all’. Despite their collective agreement, she says, ‘anybody can fall’ (Aliant Worker 6, personal interview, April 6, 2006).

**Convergent Unionism and the Aliant Strike: Lessons and Prospects for Labour**

Call centre work presents some diversity globally in terms of its labour conditions (Holman, Batt & Holtgrewe, 2007), ranging from unionised and well-remunerated positions in some public services to the precarious, low paying, highly routinised, and stressful work commonly found in the outsourced call-centre sector. Customer contact labour that sustains the telecommunications sector across developed countries has tended to see a slide across the spectrum from the former to the latter over the last twenty years, as incumbent telecommunications monopolies have been privatised, outsourced their production processes to non-unionised companies, or spun off the call-centre portion of their operations into entirely new ventures. As these companies have seen their need to interact with the customer increase due to the nature and range of products they offer, they have also acted to decrease their dependence on the well-remunerated, unionised portion of their workforces.

This paper has explored the way in which the labour processes of ‘clerical’ workers at Aliant have, since the 1999 merger, steadily been restructured towards those that are dominant within the outsourced, non-unionised call centres dotting New Brunswick. The latter offer a model of structuring customer contact work favoured by management, in which communicative and emotional labour is extracted from workers predictably, efficiently, and with the aim of keeping the possibility of collective resistance to a minimum. The significance of this transformation at Aliant goes beyond the more immediate forms of control it imposes in the workplace, however. Once management had restructured the labour process towards that of an outsourced call centre, it wasted little time transferring work to some of those very same call centres in the region. The

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14 The collective agreement was extended in 2007 amid the general uncertainty of the drawn-out ownership bid (the largest takeover bid in Canadian history) for Aliant’s parent company BCE on the part of a consortium of investors led by the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan. The bid fell through in late 2008.
re-engineering of the labour process is used as a comprehensive disciplinary tool against unionised call-centre workers, ensuring greater flexibility in the labour process and creating an omnipresent threat of job loss. As a result, call-centre workers working for the new North American continental oligopolies like Sprint, Telus, and Aliant face serious challenges in the years to come.

The call-centre workers at Aliant actively resisted the transformation of their labour processes. This paper has explored the manner in which their resistance took shape, through their unionisation with the CEP and participation in the 2004 strike. While the CEP’s strategy of convergent unionism is relatively new, some of the features it presents are familiar. Aliant workers across the Maritimes are heirs to the kind of company-level collective bargaining process that was typical of Canada’s post-World War II Fordist telecommunications regime and dismantled as a part of the restructuring examined above. The case of the 2004 Aliant strike is therefore one where the emergent jobs of digital capitalism and the institutionally enshrined forms of collective action forged within Fordism are united. While this has meant that unionised call-centre workers currently have some degree of protection in the face of restructuring and outsourcing, this paper ends by considering how convergent unionism might be extended onto the terrain of the outsourced call-centre sector.

In the Aliant strike, having a bigger union confront a bigger employer produced some advantages for the workers, including a larger strike fund and a more coherent bargaining position. In addition, contract language was achieved limiting the outsourcing of work, meaning that unionised Aliant workers could maintain some labour security. On pensions, too, losses were limited, as Aliant workers retained access to the Defined Benefit plan. But Aliant call-centre employees could not resist the steady erosion of their positions and continual upheaval in their jobs. Given that Aliant management has had ample time to experiment with restructuring the customer contact labour process and transferring portions of it, and that this process is now quite advanced, the CEP has a weakened bargaining position because of its low presence in the regional call-centre industry as a whole, one which offers a large pool of bilingual labour for (electronically transferred) replacement work. While their particular linguistic and cultural skill-set gives them an advantage in that their work is less transferable to other regions, the same potential for the transfer of work that is allowing companies like Aliant and Telus to get through strike action relatively unscathed means that as long as call-centre workers in the rest of the province are not organised, the ‘clerical’ workers at Aliant will remain especially vulnerable to outsourcing. It follows that established telecommunications unions must pay close attention to the outsourced call-centre sector.

The problem the Aliant strike raises, therefore, is not one of union convergence in itself as an organisational form, but rather the way in which it is being applied.15 The CEP, despite its harnessing of the processes that have been unleashed within the telecommunications industry,
remains strongly premised on the firm-level, Fordist form of collective bargaining whose material basis is eroding due to restructuring (Cobble, 1996; Cranford, Das Gupta, Ladd & Vosko 2006). The combination of the potential for rapid outsourcing and the low union density characterising the Canadian call-centre sector means that the firm-by-firm organising that characterised Fordism is increasingly vulnerable in a regional economy that is open to global forces. As has been suggested by many attempting to critique, fashion, invent and refine forms of labour organisation, unions must begin to experiment with strategies to organise geographically, by industry, by occupation, and across intermittent periods of employment if they are to strike back at employers in the process of flexibly restructuring their labour (Cranford, Gellatly, Ladd & Vosko, 2006; Fine, 2006a; 2006b).

If companies like Aliant have re-engineered their labour processes, convergent unions like the CEP might stand to gain from putting more of their resources into organisational experiments of their own. One of these could involve the adoption of forms of ‘social movement’ unionism (Moody, 1997) operating on the basis of a particular constituency (call-centre workers) or location (Moncton) as opposed to a particular company. One example of how this is occurring is the growing phenomenon of worker centres, a promising strategy that is being deployed by workers across North America (Fine, 2006a; Tait, 2005). Worker centres are established in low-income communities and act as resources, spaces for organising, and skills-sharing centres for workers in that community. In a city like Moncton it is not difficult to see how establishing a worker centre aimed specifically at call-centre workers and the issues they face might be the first step on the long road of addressing both the union’s vulnerabilities and the opportunity to organise the outsourced call-centre workforce.16

To speak of this as an opportunity for the CEP and its members is not to suggest that this goal is an easy one. By all accounts, and considering the composition of call-centre labour in New Brunswick, there is little or no experience of labour struggle and collective organisation lying dormant within its ranks. As one Aliant worker suggests:

[Most of] the people going into call centres are people finishing college, university or high school… so the only people who would probably have a background with union people would have to be people that have parents that work in the mill, or at the mine, or something like that. (Richard, Donovan, ibid)

The CEP and its members thus face the challenge of organising a generation of Atlantic Canadian call-centre workers in a completely new industry with little or no memory of struggle to draw upon. One of the unionised Aliant workers describes the mindset of her less fortunate colleagues in Moncton:

I find that people aren’t aware, and most of the people never worked for a union before, as was the case for me, I was 19 coming out of college, don’t know much about the world… you know. So it’s kind of taking advantage of people not knowing what there is out there, and the same things are going through with Xwave and Clientlogic right now, which are little branches of our own companies, just down the street (Aliant worker 3, ibid).

16 Efforts such as these are commonly described as ‘community unionism,’ or forms of collective organisation among workers in low-wage jobs occupying a space between community activism and established trade unionism (Cranford, Das Gupta, Ladd & Vosko 2006; Cranford, Gellatly, Ladd & Vosko, 2006)
The challenges that outsourced call centres present for the labour movement are therefore considerable, but organising the sector is not impossible. Faced with a similar problem, organisers from the Communication Workers Union in Ireland have begun to hand out leaflets regularly outside outsourced call centres and to commit more resources to organising this major source of employment in the country (CWU organiser Ian McArdle, personal interview, February 13, 2009). In Italy, the Collettivo PrecariAtesia, a collective of precariously-employed workers at Europe’s largest outsourced call centre, Atesia, organised ten strikes against the employer between 2004 and 2007 and eventually achieved permanent contracts for most of its over 4,000 employees, but only after members of the rank and file union Cobas distributed leaflets outside the call centre for almost a decade (Brophy, 2007). The current financial crisis will take its toll on the call-centre sector, but it may also make workers in regions characterised by high rates of outsourced call-centre employment and the associated high rates of turnover more willing to hold on to their jobs and consider collective solutions to their problems rather than simply quitting and finding a job elsewhere. Meanwhile, the engagement with emerging examples of collective organisation by call-centre workers is a pressing task for their allies in academia as they shift their attention, in labour sociologist Michael Burawoy’s words (2008), from ‘labour process’ to ‘labour movement.’

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