

Goldman, D. (2024) *Disconnected: Call Center Workers Fight for Good Jobs in the Digital Age*. U. of Illinois Press

Review by Andrew Stevens

Over the last two decades, countless articles, reports, and monographs have been published about call center work. These studies have covered everything from critical labour process theory to the political economic structures defining what became a global, \$314 billion industry. So, what can be gained from another book on the subject? Well, if you read Debbie Goldman's text in the context of Trump and the dreadful state of what passes for America's economic policies these days, it turns out a lot. Here's why: foreign powers aren't responsible for the hardships facing American workers in 2025 -- it's the companies they work for. *Disconnected* charts that story through the experiences of Communication Workers of America (CWA) members employed by US telecommunications giants in a period spanning five decades.

Goldman, who served as the director of research for the CWA, opens with a very fitting vignette showcasing the voice of Victoria Kintzer, a customer service employee at Bell in the 1980s. As Goldman writes, "Kintzer had relative autonomy to use her skills, knowledge, and emotional intelligence to assist her customers. She took satisfaction in helping them, solving problems, and making sure the job was done right from start to finish" (p. 1). This was the life of a Bell customer service representative before market forces and digitization robbed from workers a great deal of their control over work.

Any exploration of call center work necessarily involves a critical treatment of the labour process. There's a reason why Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism* has routinely been used as a benchmark for understanding the nature of call center work through a Marxist lens. The struggles of telecommunication workers, and that of their unions, commences at the site of production. *Disconnected* serves as a reminder that unions aren't just about bargaining for higher wages every couple of years.

Thanks to the National Labor Relation Act's ban on company-dominated associations, newly formed independent unions joined to form the National Federation of Telephone Workers (NFTW) in 1938, before becoming the CWA a decade later. What's important about Goldman's approach is her avoidance of characterizing the pre-divestiture era as a "golden age" of work in the telecommunications industry. The pressures of speed-ups, surveillance (managerial and

technological), union avoidance, and various forms of discrimination have always been present in the industry, even during the height of New Deal-era regulations. During this period important victories were achieved by the CWA in curbing supervisory monitoring, boosting wages, and in resisting high pressure sales quotas. But the union's capacity to advance these gains shifted over time as the political economic terrain enabled the continual erosion of working conditions.

After World War II a national system of regulatory oversight created what Goldman describes as the "grand bargain" between AT&T and government agencies, prompting a precipitous rise in household telephone service, which grew from some 62 percent in 1950 to 90 percent coverage by the late 1970s. Part of this compromise meant cross-subsidizing residential customers through above-cost pricing for business and long-distance services. Access to quality telecommunications was both affordable and near-universal – and delivered mostly by unionized workers.

Of course, even in what might be considered the peak of the New Deal era, most American workers were excluded from the relative privileges the regime had to offer. This marginalization cut across gender and racial lines. Where African Americans and women made meaningful headway into large corporations, they still suffered from discrimination and exclusion. Almost 10 percent of Equal Employment Opportunity Commission complaints were filed against Bell companies in just six years following the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act (p. 25). Telecoms also maintained a sexualized division of labour within the ranks of service representative positions, an industry practice that had been in place since its founding in the 1880s. Women were also on the front lines of Taylorism, as the female-dominated operators were the first to experience the effects of digital technologies on working conditions, decades before these systems migrated to the customer service offices (36).

A changing political economic landscape defined by ideological tendencies that favoured increased competition resulted in the deregulation of America's major industries throughout the 1980s. By 1984 the breakup of AT&T under the guise of trust-busting meant the spin-off of one of the world's largest corporations into a constellation of Regional Bell Operating Companies (RBOCs). AT&T's market share of roughly 80% quickly collapsed, and the loosening of regulations opened the door to competition, putting downward pressure on labour costs. Union busting was both incidental and purposeful as new, non-union companies like Sprint and MCI came to dominate the telecom landscape.

Where strong union density rates had once helped to secure good wages for workers, subcontracting and hyper-competitive carriers undermined the collective bargaining strength of unions throughout the industry. With these structural changes came a degradation of employment conditions. Citing labour economists, *Disconnected* refers to this as a process of workplace "fissuring", whereby outsourced services reduce "not only costs but also responsibilities connected to the employment relationship" (p. 117). It's worth considering, given the current rhetoric

advanced by President Trump, that the race to the bottom took place *within* the United States through contracting out and the flight of capital to lower cost (and largely non-union) regions of America.

In the decades following the divestiture of AT&T, the CWA was on the defensive as union density rates dropped and concessionary bargaining exploded. Companies, Goldman acknowledges, “used the shift in market conditions to destabilize traditional labour-management relations” (p. 56). Sales objectives instilled fears of discipline in workers, should they fail to satisfy unobtainable goals. In some instances, employees were pressured to use the illegal practice of “slamming” to put items on customer accounts without permission (72). For these reasons the CWA made surveillance, workplace controls, and oppressive sales targets a focus of their organizing campaigns throughout the 1990s.

Despite the worsening conditions of employment, unions struggled to certify new workplaces, but hopes of a Democratic presidency reforming America’s decentralized labour relations regime were quickly dashed. Instead, the Clinton administration focused on “labour-management partnerships” to enhance worker voice on the job. Little was gained by these voluntaristic efforts, which lacked any of the institutional or legal requirements that might replicate European co-determination models. Fortunately, Goldman argues, neither the workers nor their unions were “co-opted” by management in these joint relations schemes. But the alternatives didn’t bear fruit, either. What victories the CWA did experience were hard-fought, and were still not enough to halt the hemorrhaging of jobs and subcontracting. Today, industry union density is just around 10 percent, a far cry from its peak of around 60% in the 1970s.

Disconnected is a noteworthy contribution to established literature on call centers. With a sizeable number of working-class Americans casting ballots for Trump, this book is a good read for union leaders and organizers who must demonstrate to workers that their inability to buy a house or afford health care isn’t the fault of foreign call center employees, but the union-busting and cost-cutting agendas of their own bosses. Making America great again means advancing a regulatory and labour relations regime that puts workers, not corporate profits, first. Goldman illustrates this point beautifully.

Reviewer Bio:

Andrew Stevens is an Associate Professor and Unifor Research Scholar in Labour Relations at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada. His research focuses on the sociology of work, labour studies, political economy, and industrial relations. Andrew served as a Regina city councillor until 2024, where he championed policies aimed at reducing homelessness, anti-poverty initiatives, labour rights, and ensuring that civic services and spaces meet the needs of residents not corporations.