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Methodology: The work was based on the research of Instituto Observatório Social (IOS) undertaken in 2008 and has its theoretical base in sociology and economy.

FROM FASHION TO FINANCE: Working Conditions of C&A Company Employees in Brazil

“...they put you down, absurd demands charges, they leave you ill, this on the part of the managers, there's lots of surveillance, the person is always there, always on top of you and that causes stress and anguish.”

With this story, a Brazilian worker at the giant fashion retailer, C&A, explains her work conditions. C&A is a Dutch multi-national active in fashion retail in Brazil since 1976. Today Brazil is one of the largest American markets for the corporation; as of 2008 it includes 150 stores in 60 Brazilian cities and employs close to 15 thousand workers.

Besides clothing, the corporation sells electronics among them cellular phones, MP3 players and digital cameras. C&A in Brazil also arranges financing with services such as: insurance policies, capitalization titles, personal and corporate loans, credit cards, and bank deposit certificates through Ibi Bank, which like C&A is also a subsidiary of Cofra Holding AG.

In the year 2008, the Observatório Social interviewed C&A workers to determine their work conditions. The idea of doing research with workers came after a denunciation published in the *Observatório Social Em Revista* in May 2006. In the magazine, the IOS demonstrates how C&A sells clothes manufactured in clandestine factories that exploit illegal immigrant labor in São Paulo.

The research began in March 2008, besides consulting with secondary sources -- corporate and media documents -- 867 workers from six different units and 18 companleaders were interviewed. The research questionnaire involved subjects such as worker profile, remuneration, promotion, discrimination, environment, health, and security, among others.

In Brazil a large part of the C&A workforce deal specifically with finance: insurance, credit cards, and cash withdrawals in stores. The sale of clothing involves financial operations: preferably, purchases should be made in credit card installments, with interest charged. Since workers' functions are diversified, almost all sales workers deal with financial services.

The growth in the importance of financial products and services in the portfolio of C&A products is reflected in work conditions; there are rigorous targets to achieve in credit card installment sales involving interest. Surpassing these targets can mean recognition within the company and possibly a promotion. The pressure of these targets and long workdays deteriorate work conditions and affect the health of the worker.

Union action in the sector is complicated by the corporation, which doesn't permit the presence of trade unions in the workplace, and the understanding the workers have of union affiliation and activity is largely mistaken. Dialog mechanisms with workers created by the company -- internal commissions and e-mail to the company president in Brazil -- are insufficient to improve employees' work conditions.

The objective of this project is to make Observatório Social's research known, and this in turn provides a tool for the corporation, and especially the trade unions, to improve work conditions for C&A employees in Brazil. Furthermore, this project could contribute to actions in other countries, since the company's activity, not only in fashion retail, but also in finance, is global.