

By Contribution

Hope to Despair: The Experience of Organizing Indian Call Centre Employees

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The rapid growth of India's IT Enabled Service-Business Process Outsourcing (ITES-BPO) sector has drawn the attention of several researchers whose foci have spanned varied aspects. This paper analyses whether UNITES really lived up to its reputation of being a torch bearer in organizing call centre employees and how its strategies were influenced by everyday work context of call centre employees and their socially constructed identity of being professional. The analysis is based on extensive fieldwork over a period of 8 years and in-depth interviews with union officials and more than 200 employees working in the ITES-BPO sector though this article focuses on call centre employees.

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Introduction

The rapid growth of India's IT Enabled Service-Business Process Outsourcing (ITES-BPO) sector has drawn the attention of several researchers whose foci have spanned varied aspects such as cultural transformation and identity formation of employees (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; McMillin, 2006; Mirchandani, 2004; Poster, 2007; Ramesh, 2004), emotional labor (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008), gender (Ng & Mitter, 2005; Patel, 2006), management practices (Batt, Doellgast & Kwon, 2005; Budhwar, Varma, Singh & Dhar, 2006; D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012), organizational control (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006) and union formation (James & Vira, 2010; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2008; Taylor, Noronha, Scholarios & D'Cruz, 2008). However, work on union activity still remains limited both in India and abroad. Bain and Taylor (2002) attribute this neglect to the more general perception that unions have become marginal organizations. In fact, in some countries like Germany call centers have been used to escape from the existing collective agreements or challenge to traditional regula-

tory constraints (Shire et al, 2002). However, in the UK established collective bargaining arrangements have been transferred from other parts of the existing companies to captive call centre operations (James & Vira, 2010). This success of union activity in captive call centers has been extended to employees of third-party call centers despite the significant employer hostility (Taylor & Bain, 2003). Nonetheless, this achievement in the UK has not been replicated by the established labor unions in India (James & Vira, 2010) despite the fact that India's call centre workers experience greater workplace indignities than their counterparts in the UK (Taylor & Bain, 2005).

Indian ITES-BPO employers have vociferously argued that the formation of unions would only threaten the flow of foreign direct investment into India, spelling disaster for the fledgling industry in the country. Hence, the introduction of third-party intervention does not augur well for its future. Further, unions are irrelevant to the ITES-BPO sector employees as employers provide exceptionally good work environments and the sophisticated human resource management strategies take care of the interests of employees (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009b).

Unions are irrelevant to the ITES-BPO sector employees as employers provide exceptionally good work environments

It was in this unfavorable context that UNITES Professional (henceforth re-

ferred to as UNITES in this paper) came into existence in September 2005. Some argue that the alternative occupational organizing model (James & Vira, 2010) of this new union which accounted for the socially constructed 'professional' identity (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009 a) was better positioned to confront the new realities of work and employment in India's new service economy than the traditional collective bargaining model (Taylor & Bain, 2008) known to India's established labor unions (James & Hira, 2010) given the inherent contradiction of being termed a professional while performing call centre work (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009 b).

This paper analyses whether UNITES really lived up to its reputation of being a torch bearer in organizing call centre employees and how its strategies were influenced by everyday work context of call centre employees and their socially constructed identity of being professional. The analysis is based on extensive fieldwork over a period of 8 years and in-depth interviews with union officials and more than 200 employees working in the ITES-BPO sector, though the article focuses on call centre employees.

Techno-bureaucratic Controls

Technology dominates the work context and work experience of call centre agents. The automated call distribution (ACD) system distributes calls, queues numbers and displays waiting times (Taylor & Bain, 2005), thus, systematizing control and possessing the power to push

and pace work (Callaghan & Thompson, 2001), while simultaneously enabling management to set and measure daily output without the need for constant and direct control (van der Broek, 2004). Technology-based mechanisms also allowed the monitoring of targets, setting the average handling time (AHT) of the call, call wrap-up time, call waiting time and calculation of call abandonment rates. Moreover, since all calls are recorded and stored in archives, calls could be retrieved at any time and analyzed for the purpose of evaluation and appraisal. It was not uncommon for recorded calls to be randomly pulled out by analysts in the quality department and be examined for customer interaction including sensitivity, politeness, warmth, understanding customer needs, handling irate customers, adherence to the script, fluency in English language, understanding of the process, use of a neutral accent, maintenance of prescribed procedures including assistance offered and information provided, accuracy of documentation, and other parameters specified by the client in the service level agreement (SLA) signed with vendor organizations.

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However, the employment of call centre technology as a monitoring and measurement device did not spell the end of human supervision. In addition, to having a master screen on their computers which tracked and highlighted in real time

the ongoing work of each individual agent in the team, TLs stationed at a central point on the call floor, were always in a position to overlook the operations and keep an eye on the agents. Call barging (where TLs, quality analysts and other superiors and in some cases even clients listen in simultaneously but remotely on live calls to evaluate agents' performance) and side-jacking (where TLs, quality analysts and other superiors physically sit next to the agent and listen and evaluate his/her call) also form part of performance management (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009a).

With customer satisfaction being as important as production levels, employer organizations monitor agent interactions with customers, rewarding those who perform emotional labor as expected and punishing those who do not. In keeping with Belt, Richardson and Webster (1999), agents had to smile down the phone. They were trained to believe that since customers could decipher their moods, the espousal and display of a positive frame of mind was important to induce a similar demeanor in customers, to enhance the perceived quality of the service interaction and to leave behind a favorable impression about the client. It was also made clear to agents that abusive customers had to be handled with empathy, tact, patience and detachment – even hints of reciprocating customers' negative backlash (whether through abuse in English/an Indian language, non-verbal cues or cutting off the call) would invite termination of employment. They were required to allow the customer to calm down and then proceed with the

business at hand. Further, to counter customers' racial and ethnic animosity, call centre agents had to adopt cultural and linguistic traits together with the use of pseudonyms. Linguistic training served the purpose of facilitating mutual understanding between customers and agents (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2005), the aim being to refine agents' language such that they could blend in with customers and appear less Indian (Cohen & El-Sawad, 2007) by adopting pseudonyms.

Working Conditions

In order to meet client requirements, employer organizations created 8-9 hour shifts with two 15 minutes breaks and one 30 minute break and 5 day work weeks. Adherence to shift timings was recorded via log in and log out data. Call centre agents mentioned how such strict observation of time meant that they could not log out of their systems or leave their seats even to go to the restroom (if it was an emergency, they had to seek permission from the team leader to do so). Not surprisingly then, on days when the call flow was very high, agents enjoyed neither breathing space nor breaks and were expected to report to duty no matter how ill they were. In some organizations, the management kept a strict watch on people taking sick leave, even going to the extent of checking out agents' homes or places frequented by them as well as verifying submitted medical certificates (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009a). Further, while agents with less than 6 months tenure with the organization were not eligible for any kind of leave, agents whose

tenure went beyond 6 months were expected to plan for and inform about their leave requirements well in advance. Availing of leave without prior consent was considered to be an unauthorized absence, and were either warned or dismissed with some employer organizations going to the extent of blocking bank salary accounts of those absenting themselves and refusing to give relieving letters to those who quit.

Failure to meet employer organizational expectations whether in matters of job performance, task-related requirements or general workplace etiquette, resulted in punishments. While punishments ranged from warnings, retraining and suspension to termination and dismissal, the degree of punishment awarded depended on the nature and frequency of the offence. With termination and dismissal being used even in cases of confirmed employees, the primacy of transactional psychological contracts was evident (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009a). As Ramesh (2004) states, a confirmation letter means nothing – agents enjoy titular status and can be terminated at any time without notice.

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High Work Pressure & Stress

Job design elements and techno-bureaucratic controls together contributed to a high stress work environment for

agents. Agents from inbound centers recounted being confronted with prominent digital displays which emphasize the number of stacked calls waiting to be answered. Taylor and Bain (1999) describe such a situation as “an assembly-line in the head” which precipitates perennial pressure in agents, stemming from the knowledge that the completion of the current call signifies the onset of the next one in a never-ending queue. Organizations seemed to be adopting a tightly controlled, cost-efficient, bureaucratic and customer-oriented structure resulting in monotonous work (Budhwar et al, 2006; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2007). It was, therefore, not surprising to note that call centres came to be called “new-age sweatshops” or “captive units” (Budhwar et al, 2006) or exaggerated form of mass production model (Batt et al, 2005; Taylor & Bain, 2005) with oppressive work environments (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2009) while agents working there were called “cyber coolies” (Ramesh, 2004).

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Agents were always encouraged to achieve beyond their specified targets and were constantly reminded by their TLs and other superiors that their worth lay in generating revenue for the organization. During phases when call volumes were high or targets were not being met, agents were made to stretch such that they had to forfeit or shorten breaks and/or work beyond shift hours or on weekly/public holi-

days. This extended work time and increased job demands did not entail payment of overtime. For those aspiring to move up the organizational hierarchy, initially to become team leaders and later managers, additional initiatives beyond the stipulated job description requirements (such as helping their TL in call escalation, preparing reports or managing the floor in the TL’s absence) were undertaken in order to increase one’s visibility and create a favorable impression.

The experience of physical and mental strain, under the circumstances, was inevitable. Health problems such as loss of appetite, changes in body weight, acidity, nausea, constipation, colds and coughs, diabetes, blood pressure, insomnia, chronic fatigue and drowsiness, anxiety, depression, irritability and cognitive disruptions were commonly reported. Uninterrupted call flows, apart from entailing incessant listening and talking lead to oral and aural complications, necessitated continuous use of various kinds of technology, resulting in sensory-motor problems linked to the visual and auditory systems and repetitive strain injury (RSI). The sedentary nature of the job, coupled with the near absence of any significant locomotion during the shift, caused stiffness, cramps and backaches. Reducing or eliminating breaks interfered with agents’ eating habits. Where breaks were permitted, long queues in the cafeteria forced agents to choose fast food or skip their meal/snack in order to log in back in time, affecting their nutrition intake.

Disruption of Work-Life Balance

With customers being located in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, employer organizations developed work shifts to match the relevant time zones. This translated not only in agents having to work during the Indian night but also going through periodic changes in their work timings as shifts rotated fortnightly or monthly. Noronha and D'Cruz (2009a), Poster (2007) and Ramesh (2004) state that temporal adjustments wreaked havoc in agents' biological clocks, resulting in illness described above. Though most agents' bodies adapted with time, for a few of them, health problems persisted. It is relevant to mention that those whose bodies adjusted to nocturnal schedules found themselves physically compelled to maintain the same schedule on weekly and public holidays.

McMillin (2006), Noronha and D'Cruz (2009a), Ramesh (2004) and Singh and Pandey (2005) state that agents also consumed a lot of tea and coffee to stay awake and remain alert, especially during night shifts while cigarettes and alcohol served as stress alleviators and to counter insomnia on weekly and public holidays. Since all these problems were more common and more severe in US and Canadian processes because of the greater time difference, agents preferred UK and Australian processes.

Besides this, researchers (for example, McMillin, 2006; Mirchandani, 2004; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2006; Poster,

2007; Ramesh, 2004; Singh & Pandey, 2005) observe that there were problems related to spending time with family members, keeping in touch with relatives and friends and completing household duties. Maintaining a social life, even with those living in the same household, and pursuing leisure activities were reserved for the weekend. But here too, organizational demands for team outings, team get-togethers and office gatherings played a hindering role. Moreover, the mismatch between Indian public holidays and agents' public holidays (decided by the customer group being served) further cut into agents' opportunities to interact with their social networks. Some call center agents stated that they had neither seen nor had a meal with their family members for several weeks. Also, they missed family celebrations, gatherings and parties at home during national holidays and festivals. Losing contact with friends was frequently mentioned. In short, as Poster (2007) states, employees have much to lose in this scenario including their bodies, their mental stability, their family lives as well as their career trajectories.

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In spite of these challenges, agents accept the situation because of their professional identity.

The Notion of Professionalism

Adherence to job and organizational demands as well as discipline and priority towards work were constantly emphasized, linked to the notion of professionalism. That is, employer organizations cultivated the notion of professionalism in their agents in order to gain the latter's compliance and commitment to the realization of organizational goals. Therefore, it was not surprising that agents, while acknowledging the nature and requirements of their jobs, saw nothing amiss in their work situation, maintaining that the acceptance and fulfillment of such job-related demands formed an integral part of a professional's life. As professionals, they had to put organizational interests and work demands above their personal discomfort. They could be counted on to perform and deliver optimally and behave rationally and objectively, observing and respecting organizational requirements.

Clearly, agents' professional sense of self worked in a pervasive manner, disciplining them on the job and ensuring that they behaved objectively and rationally and performed optimally. For instance, call center agent, viewing the primacy accorded to the customer through the lens of their professional identity, accepted both the gains and demands of emotional labor. According to them, complying with the requirements associated with emotional labor was part of being professional. Moreover, agents accepted organizational directives about customer abuse, recognizing the role of client requirements, organizational sur-

vival and process retention. In fact, Poster (2007) points out that it was quite a sobering experience for her as an American to listen to the steadfast composure and professionalism of Indian employees.

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Organizational facilities and processes as well as material gains added to agents' notion of professionalism, strengthening their compliance with and commitment to employer organizations and their requirements. Employer organizations were located in ultra-modern buildings, offering state-of-the-art infrastructure and facilities. Most employer organizations sought to provide physical work environments of international standards resembling those in the West, with some clients insisting that the call floor be an exact replica of the identical process being executed overseas. Facilities within the office premises included individual lockers, cafeterias with wide-ranging menus at reasonable prices, recreation and de-stress rooms with bean bags, computers with internet access, music systems, televisions, indoor games such as carom boards, table tennis, chess, pool, etc., video games and reading spaces. Gymnasiums, badminton courts and sleep facilities were also provided by a few organizations.

Gains from the job further nurtured agents' professional identity. Designations attached to call centre agents' tasks

such as customer care officer, call center executive, customer care executive, contact center representative and customer support executive invoked images of white-collared, professional work and upward mobility, enhancing agents' self-esteem. Further, both Noronha and D'Cruz (2009a) and Poster (2007) observe that call center agents experienced status enhancement because of association with overseas clients and customers and employment with MNC organizations, where applicable, as well as opportunities to visit client locations in foreign countries for training purposes, where applicable. Moreover, employees in this sector, particularly those working for MNC captives, MNC 3rd party and Indian 3rd party organizations, received attractive pay packages. In addition to their salary, agents received performance incentives in financial and material forms such as gift vouchers, clothes and accessories, movie and entertainment tickets, landline phone sets, cordless phone sets, mobile handsets, i-pods, DVD (digital versatile disc) players, etc. Various allowances such as food allowance, night shift allowance (for those working in the night shift), transport facilities and medical/health services (including a doctor, a counselor and a nutritionist on call) formed part of the package (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006). That agents abhorred nomenclatures such as "cyber coolies" and "slaves on Roman ships" (Ramesh, 2004), often used to describe them, testifies to the pride they derived from their professional identity.

Apart from the type of designations used and the nature of returns provided,

the organisation's concerns for agents' professional development and career growth were mentioned. Many organisations had tie-ups with educational institutions for business administration and management courses, and agents availing of this opportunity were usually fully or partially funded by their employers. Similarly, agents reported that organizations created avenues for vertical movement. Through internal job postings (IJPs) circulated every quarter, communication about promotion opportunities was shared confirming to the fact that career growth was determined by performance and not by socio-demographic factors, seniority or intra-organizational social networks. Organizational claims that merit and objectivity influenced promotion decisions were interpreted by agents as testimony of its professional orientation (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2012).

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Creating an atmosphere of congeniality and camaraderie, particularly between superiors and subordinates, testified to the organization's professional orientation. It is a common practice to address everyone, including one's superiors, by first name in a call centre organization, thereby downplaying hierarchy and promoting integration. Indeed, agents reported instances where employees were

reprimanded for using prefixes such as “sir” or “madam” when interacting with their superiors. Yet, behaving disrespectfully and overstepping boundaries is not tolerated.

The professional approach adopted by call centre organizations extended to employee redressal opportunities. Indeed, call center organizations prided themselves on the number and nature of grievance avenues they provided their agents with. According to them, in keeping with a professional style of management, openness of communication in terms of content, form, style and route were valued. Therefore, in addition to periodic employee satisfaction surveys, skip-level meetings and open fora with superiors, employees with grievances could approach anyone in the organization whether the CEO, the TL or someone in between via email, letters, telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. That the professional atmosphere in the organization precluded the complainant’s victimization was strongly emphasized (D’Cruz & Noronha, 2012).

Under such circumstances, not only did agents feel valued and empowered, considering employers in a positive light and displaying greater commitment to them, but also any third party intervention including legal protection and collectivist groups were seen as redundant. In other words, with their employers taking such great care of their interests, alternative mechanisms were not required.

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The Challenges

ITES-BPO employees were not in favor of collectivization in spite of acknowledging the oppressive environment they worked in. Indeed, positive aspects of their work experience outlined above, especially their professional identity, coupled with the perception that such gains were not available in other employment opportunities sealed their view on the matter. Overall, ITES-BPO employees’ stand was similar to that of the employers who emphasize that sophisticated human resource management (HRM) strategies take care of their interests.

Agents also demonstrated an aversion towards the tactics adopted by traditional unions which to their minds, were not in keeping with professional behavior. As some of them specified, call center agents conducted themselves with dignity while sloganeering, picketing and striking were unbecoming of professional demeanor (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2006; Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009b). That employer organizations do not recognize trade unions further complicates the perspective meted out to agents. Agents were even told by their employers that their association with the unions could result in their being dismissed from their jobs. Consequently, they feared adverse reactions, including dismissal, should their employers learn about their links with a

union. Finally, agents' opinions were influenced by organizations' emphasis that unions would hamper the growth of the Indian ITES-BPO sector, with implications for employment opportunities.

The exploitation and abuse associated with the oppressive work environment violated employee rights and called for intervention.

Nonetheless, recognizing the de-personalized bullying (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008) present within the sector, senior trade unionists and labor activists from other sectors took the lead to initiate collective action here. In their opinion, notwithstanding the benefits ITES-BPO employees received from their jobs, the exploitation and abuse associated with the oppressive work environment violated employee rights and called for intervention. These leaders, largely from the telecom sector, were backed by UNI (Union Network International - a global union federation [GUF] of national and regional trade unions worldwide organizing in industries linked to skills and services [GUFs were earlier known as international trade secretariats/ITS]) and its Asia-Pacific Regional Office (UNI-APRO), played an active role in the formation of UNITES Professionals in September 2005 (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009 a; b).

Senior union leaders associated with UNITES recognized the importance of having to work within the framework of ITES-BPO employees' espousal of the professional identity which was subtly captured in the name of the new collec-

tive. Responding to these circumstances, senior unionists acknowledged the need to move away from the conventional protest and grievance handling functions of unions, to engage in social dialogue and partnership with management while continuing to champion issues of employee rights, justice, fairness and well-being.

In keeping with this goal the ITES-BPO employees at the founding convention unanimously agreed that all UNITES office bearers who had no prior exposure to or experience in collective action would be provided with training in industrial relations, collective bargaining, labor laws, organizational behavior, human resource management and leadership. Further, for effective and efficient functioning, good governance and active participation, UNITES resolved to hold regular meetings, free and fair elections and function democratically. All UNITES chapters set membership targets to be achieved through social gatherings, general workplace campaigns and by organizing specific events that were relevant to employee interests. Further, all chapters agreed to regularly exchange ideas and views by organizing periodic state and national conventions, promoting and publicizing activities of all chapters and engaging in and facilitating web-based interaction with and between members/ITES-BPO employees. In addition to liaison with Indian and international trade unions to strengthen the collectivization movement in general, UNITES professionals resolved to also work with national and international NGOs and social movements in a bid to promote the well-being of all people across the globe.

Following the founding convention, committee members across UNITES chapters began to work enthusiastically to realize the organization's agenda. Getting registered, securing membership and initiating activities formed the point of departure. Adopting a brand marketing approach UNITES highlighted its affiliation with a global union UNI. UNITES's office-bearers believed that this was an appropriate way to reach out to and connect with an upwardly mobile, middle-class oriented, Western influenced, individualistic group of ITES employees. In terms of activities, UNITES's organizational achievements include its campaign for employee safety in the aftermath of the tragic rape and murder of Bangalore-based Hewlett Packard (HP) employee Pratibha Murthy, its representation of employees of the Bangalore-based company BelAir who had been summarily dismissed without pay, successful intervention to support employees of a third-party centre in Noida in their efforts to secure payments that had been denied, its negotiation of four collective bargaining agreements (although these arrangements were confined to small and medium enterprises) in the domestic sector and its advocacy role in individual cases (Taylor et al, 2008).

Notwithstanding the commitment and motivation of UNITES's office-bearers and the influence and guidance of senior unionists and activists, a five year on-going follow-up of UNITES's achievements reveals a limited effectiveness. This was mainly due to lack of government support of registration of the new union, employers antipathy,

lukewarm response from employees, weakness in organizing and internal trade union rivalry.

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Committee members reported that their efforts towards registration were stalled by the government response that, for the ITES-BPO sector, such a step was not possible at the national level but should be undertaken at the state level. Though baffled by this response, committee members pursued state-wise registrations for each chapter. Despite their best attempts, UNITES was successful in registering itself only in the state of Karnataka where it secured legal status under the Trade Disputes Act (1926) through the Labor Commission of the state (Taylor et al, 2008). Expressing bewilderment over the government responses, UNITES's office-bearers maintained that the inability to register chapters was an impediment to mobilizing membership in other cities.

Besides, government apathy, mobilizing membership was impeded by the employee self-concept of being 'professional' and participants did not consider themselves to fall within the purview of collectivization endeavors. Not surprisingly, the UNITES membership base was limited but the exact number of members remains hazy. Fear of losing one's job or having one's name blacklisted on NASSCOM's database due to association with a union, also contributed strongly

to participants' reluctance. Not surprisingly then, in cases where participants were unhappy due to actual or perceived violation(s) of their rights, they preferred to quit the employer organization and take up fresh employment elsewhere rather than seek redressal even with union support. UNITES's office bearers underscored the predominance of self-interest in ITES-BPO employees, emphasizing that neither UNITES's members nor other ITES-BPO employees who approached them were willing to make any personal sacrifice or compromise to facilitate collectivization endeavors.

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Where employees express interest in or become members of UNITES, subscription becomes an issue. They either pay nothing or only part of the membership fee, making the expectation of larger donations redundant. UNITES's office bearers shared that though their annual membership is just Rs. 60/-, employees were reluctant 'to put their money where they do not see a major achievement' while at the same time expected action and outcomes. Though the basic underlying factor for this appears to be an inappropriate strategy (in connecting with ITES-BPO employees), sustainability therefore becomes a challenge. UNITES's reluctance to charge membership subscriptions also pre-empted the possibility of building up a member-driven

and member-sustained organization capable of independent survival.

Approaching employees directly by visiting workplaces was not considered a viable option for mobilizing membership. Apart from restrictions of access and surveillance and the constraints of pick-ups and drops, even waiting outside/near workplaces held no promise because of employees' mind-sets. Exploring alternate means of reaching out to and representing ITES-BPO employees was considered the way forward. With the internet serving as a platform, e-publicity, web-based interaction and e-signature campaigns were actively pursued. Nonetheless, UNITES's office-bearers claimed that e-publicity brought much traffic to UNITES's website. Yet very few of these converted to actual members who paid even a partial subscription fee. Our research on workplace bullying in the ITES-BPO and IT sectors highlights that UNITES was not heard of by most targets even in Bangalore where these industries are concentrated and where UNITES is head-quartered, indicating that even internet-based efforts did not result in building a widespread and well-known reputation among ITES-BPO employees.

Our research on workplace bullying in the ITES-BPO and IT sectors highlights that UNITES was not heard of by most targets even in Bangalore.

Speaking to the press and TV channels, maintaining a website and conduct-

ing print and electronic campaigns neither generated a large-scale and popular image among the general public nor struck a chord to catalyze ITES-BPO employees. As Taylor and Bain (2008) argue, publicity is a pre-requisite for growth but cannot substitute a mobilized membership which is a union's key resource in its quest for effectiveness. In UNITES's case, given that publicity campaigns did not contribute to creating a public recognition, leave alone building a membership base, there is a need for further reflection on how to reach out to and connect with ITES-BPO employees.

While UNITES envisaged employer partnerships managed via social dialogue, collaboration and constructive engagement, employer organizations refused to interact with them. Seeing unions as unfavorable entities that would vitiate the conducive sectoral climate and discourage foreign investment, prompted employers not only to ignore UNITES but also to render extra-organizational interventions redundant through the aforementioned socio-ideological controls and inclusivist and exclusivist HRM strategies. Though employers adopted an anti-union stand essentially to protect organizational identity, autonomy and boundaries as they considered union linkages to represent unwanted outside influence, popular perceptions of unions as anti-social, disruptive and violent also contributed keeping employees aloof. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising that UNITES was unable to forge any GFAs with foreign MNCs based in India. UNITES's office-bearers shared that even junior and middle managers here refused to meet them in spite

of their being accompanied by UNI and UNI-APRO officials who had worked out GFAs with the overseas offices of these same corporations.

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At the same time, external linkages with Indian and international unions were not sufficiently effective. International trade union influence on UNITES, beyond its genesis, arose mainly from UNI and UNI-APRO. UNITES was affiliated to and received funding from these bodies. Yet the relationship did not move further than affiliation and funding, failing to capitalize on UNI's and UNI-APRO's transnational presence and emphasis on IFAs. Interactions with UK unions such as UNISON and UNITE not only remained at the leader level but also fell short of coming together and initiating action on issues of common interest. Moreover, the pursuit of community unionism was still-born.

Underlying this bleak assessment of UNITES's initial five years appears to be impacted by the internal functioning of UNITES's committee. Apart from meetings not being held regularly, ad-hocism characterized the composition of the committee whose operations remained concentrated in the office bearers at Bangalore. Consequently, office bearers were not only removed and/or replaced but also exchanged positions between themselves. Such changes took place arbitrarily without elections and member consultation. Moreover, training

in industrial relations, collective bargaining, labor laws, organizational behavior, human resource management and leadership, as envisaged during the founding convention, was not provided either. Internal dynamics took a turn for the worse in early 2011, resulting in a rift between the President and the Secretary, affecting organizational functioning. Since 2011, quite unfortunately there has been a lot of internal conflict within the office bearers bringing UNITES activities to a virtual standstill.

Individualized Resistance

Although the above narration points to the weakness of collectivization of the ITES-BPO sector, D'Cruz and Noronha (2006) hold that the techno-bureaucratic controls and the socio-ideological controls stressing professionalism do not go uncontested. Agents worked out ways and means of resistance, making the disciplinary logic of professionalism, combined with techno-bureaucratic control, an imperfect form of governance. For instance, extending the call wrap-up time during which relevant information from the phone conversation is keyed into the system, altering their position in the call distribution queue by pressing the release button on their phone, entering wrong customer email addresses into the system if the call did not proceed satisfactorily, extending restroom breaks, unnecessarily transferring customers' calls and delaying the disconnection of calls were some of the ways in which a few agents got some breathing space. Further, customer abuse was dealt with either by placing the phone in mute mode and cursing the cus-

tomers aloud in the presence of team members or by pressing the mute button and enabling the loudspeaker so that the team could collectively listen to, make fun of and enjoy the customer's tirade. Agents were able to decipher when their calls were being monitored either because of an echoing or beeping sound that accompanied such activity or from the call monitoring data sheet, and they would take special care to ensure their optimal performance during that time. In their own words, "they played the game once they got a hang of it". Sometimes, agents also helped ease their team members' strain. That is, when agents filled in for TLs who for some reason, could not monitor calls, they manipulated the entire system by telling their team members to give a list of calls on which they had performed well (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009a).

Conclusion

The SLAs between the client and the employer organization laid down the process and outcome requirements of the project. To suit their foreign customers call center participants had to meet various performance criteria all of which were constantly monitored via techno-bureaucratic mechanisms. Asking agents to stay beyond the shift hours, to work with shorter breaks and implementation of strict login hours and attendance was not uncommon. Failure to meet these expectations resulted in warnings, blocking of salary accounts, non-issuance of experience certificates or termination. Moreover, night shifts did not allow employees time to take care of their family chores or attend social gatherings with

friends and relatives. However, defining themselves as professionals, ITES-BPO employees showed little interest in collectivization endeavors even while acknowledging their oppressive work environment (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009b).

Defining themselves as professionals, ITES-BPO employees showed little interest in collectivization endeavors even while acknowledging their oppressive work environment.

Union leaders organizing call center employees tried to form a union which accounted for this ‘professional’ identity by stressing on social dialogue, partnership, democratic functioning, member involvement, regular meetings and training of office bearers that would be a break from how traditional Indian unions operated. Though initially UNITES showed promise, in the long run it failed to exploit the contradiction inherent in the term ‘professional’ as espoused by employers, nor did it adequately respond to this socially constructed identity (Noronha & D’Cruz, 2009b). More than government apathy and employer antipathy, it was the dissipation of the initial enthusiasm of organizing ITES-BPO employees that hindered union formation. The undemocratic functioning, financial weakness (because of the dependence on foreign funds rather than on member subscription), inadequate mobilizing skills of office bearers, internal rivalry and concentration of power in the hands of the Bangalore leadership that resulted in the ineffectiveness of UNITES. To conclude

UNITES not only failed to make a break from the past but also failed to leave its imprint on the memory of its constituency.

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