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Taylor, P. and Noronha, E. and D'Cruz, P. and Scholarios, D. (2008) *Employee voice and collective formation in the Indian ITES-BPO industry*. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (22). pp. 37-47. ISSN 0012-9976

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# Employee Voice and Collective Formation in Indian ITES-BPO Industry

PHILIP TAYLOR, ERNESTO NORONHA, DORA SCHOLARIOS, PREMILLA D'CRUZ

The growth of the information technology enabled services-business process outsourcing industry calls for attention to employees' working conditions and rights. Can an independent organisation such as UNITES Pro (the union of information technology enabled services professionals) represent employees' interests and effectively work towards protecting their rights and improving their working conditions? A survey of UNITES members indicates that they identify with the need for such an organisation to deal with poor supervisory and managerial treatment, concerns for employee safety, grievances related to pay and workload, and even the indignities of favouritism.

The spectacular growth of the Indian information technology enabled services-business process outsourcing (ITES-BPO) industry has thrust to the fore issues of working conditions and employee rights, particularly, the question of whether an independent organisation is required to represent employee interests. The position of National Association of Software and Service Companies (Nasscom), the employers' organisation for the ITES-BPO industry, has been consistent, dismissing trade unions as unnecessary in the Indian context on grounds summarised by its former president, Kiran Karnik. "In the BPO industry the grievances of the workers are addressed promptly and the wages are good so there is no need for unions" (<http://www.rediff.com/money/2005/oct/17bpo.htm>).

According to this widely-accepted narrative, the ITES-BPO industry is portrayed as providing unparalleled career opportunities and generous pay and rewards' packages for the young graduates who overwhelmingly make up its workforce. On the rare occasions that employee dissatisfactions or grievances do arise, they can be resolved easily and timeously by management within existing company structures and arrangements. Human resource (HR) departments thus operate as "substitutes" for the development of forms of collective organisation and representation. These are what have been termed the "inclusivist" strategies of employers [d'Cruz and Noronha 2006; Noronha and d'Cruz 2006], by which concerted efforts have succeeded in capturing employees "hearts and minds" and capitalising on employees' powerful sense of professional identity, resulting in a "productively docile" workforce [Remesh 2004].

While there is some evidence of a less positive experience of work, it is commonly held that ITES-BPO professionals embrace their employment opportunity so eagerly that they identify uncritically with their company's success and favourable working conditions that the employment relationship is essentially conflict-free. At the same time, there is evidence showing that employers have tended to adopt a firmer, more "exclusivist" stance towards trade unionism. There are three aspects to this opposition that need to be considered.

First, the chief executive officers (CEOs) of Indian third party companies have publicly declared that unionism should be opposed because its presence would dissuade clients from sourcing from India, thereby damaging the interests of the industry and by implication, threaten the opportunities and job security of employees.

Second, many of the multinational corporations that operate captive facilities in India or act as business service providers

Philip Taylor and Dora Scholarios are at the University of Strathclyde, UK. Ernesto Noronha and Premilla D'Cruz ([pdacruz@iimahd.ernet.in](mailto:pdacruz@iimahd.ernet.in)) are at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

(for example IBM) have industrial relations histories which have displayed an opposition to trade unionism.

Third, many UK and European companies such as Prudential, Lloyds/TSB, Royal and Sun Alliance, Barclays, Siemens Business Services and ABN-AMRO, who have offshored (either to their own “captive” operations or to third party providers) do recognise trade unions for bargaining purposes in their “home” operations but have not extended these arrangements to India. While it is not being argued that explicit union avoidance was a primary motive for relocation, the central drivers of lower costs and labour flexibilities certainly have been facilitated by the union-free industrial relations environment prevailing in Indian ITES-BPO.

Though these factors together imply that attempts to establish an independent employees’ organisation would be destined to fail, for a minority of ITES-BPO employees, the establishment of precisely such an organisation (UNITES Pro-the union of information technology enabled services professionals) has been a welcome initiative, providing them with a voice and a body to represent their interests.

With a principal aim to interrogate the categorical claim that organising efforts in Indian ITES-BPO will be stillborn, this paper is based on a study of the membership of UNITES, highlighting their experiences, perceptions and expectations. While it enables us to evaluate the extent to which there is a genuine basis for the establishment of trade unionism in Indian ITES-BPO, its wider significance lies in the fact that little is known of organising workers in the “offshored” industries of developing economies [Castree et al 2004; Kelley 2002].

## 1 Indian ITES-BPO Industry

While the Philippines, South Africa, Latin American and eastern Europe states are emerging locations, India remains the pre-eminent location for offshored and outsourced business activities, accounting for 46 per cent of all global outsourcing [Nasscom-McKinsey 2005] and offering “an unbeatable mix of low costs, deep technical and language skills, mature vendors and supportive government policies” [Walker and Gott 2007: 29].

The figures provided by Nasscom are undeniably impressive. Indian ITES-BPO exports were estimated to have grown from \$ 6.3bn in the financial year 2005-06 to \$ 8.4bn in 2006-07, while revenue in domestic ITES-BPO grew from \$ 0.9bn to \$ 1.2bn in the same period [Nasscom 2007].

Direct employment in ITES-BPO is calculated at 5,53,000 in the 2006-07 final year. Putting the employment figures for India into some comparative perspective, a May 2007 report of employment levels for the second most important ITES-BPO global destination, the Philippines, was given as 1,60,000 call centre employees and perhaps another 60,000 for employees engaged in various back-office activities [Locsin 2007].

That the Indian ITES-BPO industry displays a high level of internal differentiation, which has implications for the collectivisation endeavour cannot be ignored. Apart from geographical dispersion across Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities whose urban character, infrastructure, costs and labour supply and quality differ considerably, the industry also embodies heterogeneity as

companies fall into several distinct categories including multinational corporation (MNC) captives, MNC third party providers, Indian third party providers (either pure plays or BPO arms of software companies) and domestic players whose scale of operations differ widely. While 60-65 per cent of services fall within the call centre space and 35-40 per cent are back office activities, there has been no wholesale move up the value chain towards greater complexity. Undeniably, though there has been considerable diversification in the range of processes delivered from India and there certainly has been growth in higher-value and professional knowledge process outsourcing, the evidence strongly suggests that, in overall terms, the ITES-BPO industry in India still tends to provide largely standardised and routinised services of low complexity [Taylor and Bain 2006b], in keeping with the mass production model, which has important implications for work organisation and the experience of work [Batt et al 2005; Taylor and Bain 2005]. Tight monitoring, surveillance and a plethora of quantitative and qualitative controls are implemented, minimising employee discretion [d’Cruz and Noronha 2006; Remesh 2004; Taylor and Bain 2005].

Although the “cyber coolie” metaphor [Remesh 2004] may be overdrawn, many voice and non-voice agents do report that they experience their work as pressurising and contributing to exit and burnout. In recent times, many employees have experienced an intensification of work, stemming from sharpened competition in the outsourcing market, affecting both captives and third parties, rising costs in India and reducing margins [Nasscom-McKinsey 2005]. While companies have sought to realise cost savings through economies of scale, concomitant with this has been this focus on leveraging efficiencies through “managing productivity and utilisation”. The outcome of these imply increasing pressure on workers: longer shifts, shorter and fewer breaks and tighter targets. Yet, the existing distinctive characteristics of the Indian BPO industry embody significant pressures: nocturnal call-handling for overseas customers, long commuting times, extended shifts and unpaid overtime, all of which have health and work-life balance implications.

Researchers have also identified a “democratic deficit” in Indian ITES-BPO, with customary Indian hierarchical cultures being transposed to the ITES-BPO sector across segments [Taylor and Bain 2006a]. Top-down methods dominate staff communications systems [Nasscom 2003] and employee involvement practices are task-based, geared to increasing productivity and quality, without giving employees a voice, let alone any real participation in decision-making. Employees have reported managerial and supervisory arbitrariness and at times authoritarian treatment, including disciplinaries and even dismissals for little or no good reason. One issue that appeared to emerge as an employee concern has been the practice of managers withholding leaving or relieving certificates, by which workers are prevented from leaving for another company. These are part of more concerted Nasscom-facilitated attempts to control attrition, such as establishing non-poaching pacts [Nasscom 2005]. There is the important issue of pay and rewards which are distributed unevenly across the sector: levels of remuneration tend to be higher for back-office employees than for voice-based agents [Nasscom 2007] but,

more significantly, captives and MNCs tend to pay more than Indian third party providers and both considerably more than domestic outsourcers.

## 2 Emergence of UNITES

UNITES was formed in September 2005 on foundations laid from 2004 by the Centre for Business Processing Outsourcing Professionals (CBPOP). CBPOP had emerged organically as a network of ITES-BPO professionals who believed they needed their own organisation to represent them and advance their interests. CBPOP/UNITES was thus distinct from the Information Technology Professionals Forum (ITPF), an organisation which was oriented more specifically on software/information technology (IT) professionals [Hirschfeld 2005]. Both UNITES and ITPF were and remain projects supported by the International Trade Secretariat responsible for business services, Union Network International (UNI).

The justification for creating UNITES as a separate initiative directed exclusively at ITES-BPO was grounded in the understanding that employees' conditions of work were sufficiently distinct from those of IT professionals. Although a distinctive undertaking, UNITES took on board some of ITPF's ethos and orientation. Its members wished to develop UNITES as "a community of professionals", which would ensure that it provided educational and training services as well as information and advice for its career-minded employees. One consequence of this approach was the conscious avoidance of unnecessary adversarialism and hostility to employers, which were redolent of an inappropriate conflictual style of trade unionism that would neither progress the interests of the industry nor attract members. Nevertheless, UNITES made it clear that it would not hesitate from championing issues of employee rights, justice, fairness and corporate social responsibility and would represent those with genuine grievances against their managers and employers.

Although UNITES' history of organising ITES-BPO workers is a very recent one, its record since formation does indicate real progress [UNITES 2006]. Overcoming numerous bureaucratic obstacles, it has secured legal status under the Trades Disputes Act (1926) through the Labour Commission in Karnataka and has been granted "provisional affiliation" to Indian National Trades Union Congress (INTUC). It now has organising centres and claims viable chapters in six areas (Bangalore, Hyderabad, New Delhi/NCR, Chennai, Mumbai and Cochin).

Analysis of UNITES activities between its formation and the research period [Taylor and Bain 2008a,b] demonstrates that success has been achieved through much-publicised campaigns on behalf of ITES-BPO employees. The issue which provided UNITES with its first recruitment opportunity was generated by the distinctive Indian industry practice of providing transportation for employees. Employees had long identified concerns over night-time safety, which tragically anticipated the rape and murder of Pratibha Srikanth Murthy in December 2005, a young woman employed by Hewlett Packard (HP) Globalsoft Services in Bangalore. This horrific crime galvanised public opinion and raised many important issues, most pertinently corporate responsibility for the safety of employees (especially women). The callous indifference exposed by the remarks of Som Mittal, HP's CEO, then of Nasscom's executive council (<http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/ple/>

[full\\_story.php?content\\_id=84118](http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/ple/full_story.php?content_id=84118)) and now incoming president, provoked protests in which UNITES was prominent. Through these actions, UNITES attracted its first significant tranche of members.

Other notable interventions have included representing employees of the Bangalore-based company BelAir who had been summarily dismissed without pay and successfully intervening to support employees of a third party centre in Noida in their efforts to secure payments that they had been denied. In addition, UNITES has played an important role of advocacy on behalf of many individuals.

UNITES has also succeeded in negotiating four collective bargaining agreements (Excel Outsourcing Services, e-Merge Business Processing, Infopoint and Transact Solutions), although these breakthrough arrangements are confined to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in the domestic sector and the aim of securing collective bargaining in international facing operations has yet to be realised.

Clearly, UNITES has established a genuine, if limited, presence in Indian ITES-BPO, highlighting questions concerning Nasscom and the industry's assertion that the independent representation of employees is unnecessary and unwanted in the Indian ITES-BPO environment.

## 3 The Study

The questionnaire distribution strategy aimed to capture as many UNITES' members as possible working in domestic, third party, and captive operations between April and July 2007. Using UNITES' membership databases, independent social science graduates were employed under the direction of the Indian researchers to approach members and complete the questionnaires as structured interviews. This strategy produced 1,206 completed questionnaires from Bangalore (30 per cent), Chennai (17 per cent), Hyderabad (16 per cent), Cochin (16 per cent), Mumbai (14 per cent), and Delhi/NCR (8 per cent). However, 13 per cent of respondents claimed not to be UNITES members and were excluded from analysis, leaving a total of 879 completed questionnaires, which we are confident, reflects UNITES' active membership.

Supplementary semi-structured interviews with UNITES members enabled deeper exploration of their experiences. The research team carried these out in four locations – Chennai, Delhi/NCR, Hyderabad and Bangalore. A cross section of members was chosen across genders and company type producing a total of 45 interviews, each lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were voluntary and were taped and transcribed.

### 3.1 Respondent Profile

The majority of UNITES members responding (70 per cent) was based in Indian domestic companies with 22 per cent in captives and 8 per cent in Indian third parties. This is an important finding, demonstrating the concentration of UNITES members in the domestic sub-sector and a lesser penetration amongst captives and particularly third party providers. The even gender balance reflects what we know about the industry [Batt et al 2005]. Positively, this suggests that to the limited extent that UNITES has made headway, it has succeeded in recruiting equally from both genders. Membership also reflects the strikingly youthful nature of

the workforce; the mean age of UNITES members surveyed was 24. That most respondents were employed full-time is also consistent with what is known about the ITES-BPO workforce (ibid).

More outstanding are the statistics on working hours. The mean of 216 hours per month (54 hours per week) demonstrates the prevalence in Indian ITES-BPO of a long hours culture, most pronounced in captives and domestic centres. Average tenure was one and a half years, although lower in domestic companies at just over one year. Given what is known about attrition, this

**Table 1: Respondent Characteristics**

	Captive (N=192)		Indian Third-Party (N=69)		Domestic (N=618)		Total (N=879)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender								
Male	111	58	44	66	293	48	448	52
Female	80	42	23	34	314	52	417	48
Contractual status								
Full-time	187	100	57	85	544	90	788	92
Part-time			10	15	59	10	69	8
Nature of work								
Combine call centre/BPO work	125	67	19	28	204	33	348	40
Call centre work only	62	33	48	72	413	67	523	60
Inbound calls (sales, technical support, customer service)	98	77	33	83	398	69	529	71
Outbound calls (telemarketing, sales)	30	23	7	18	180	31	217	29
Night shifts	24	22	15	35	25	16	64	21
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
Age	192	27.0	69	25.6	618	23.4	879	24.3
Tenure (months)	192	25.9	69	29.5	618	13.4	879	17.4
Monthly contracted hours <sup>a</sup>	95	206	48	191	520	219	663	216

<sup>a</sup> Based on a restricted sample range (79%) who provided calculable responses. N = number

**Table 2: Joining UNITES**

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Date joined UNITES								
Within last year	87	49	18	28	452	80	557	69
More than one year ago	92	51	46	72	111	20	249	31
How did you find out about UNITES?								
Colleague/friend at work	151	79	43	63	451	73	645	74
UNITES web site	10	5	13	19	211	34	234	27
Friend/relative working in different call centre/BPO	52	27	31	45	73	12	156	18
UNITES leaflet	2	1	5	7	51	8	58	8
How did you join UNITES?								
UNITES member in my workplace signed me up	127	67	32	47	541	88	700	80
Colleagues in my workplace encouraged me to join	51	27	35	51	106	17	192	22
I joined after receiving leaflet	0	0	2	3	55	9	57	11
I asked a UNITES member in my workplace	13	7	4	6	58	9	75	9
My team leader/manager encouraged me to join	0	0	11	16	57	9	68	8
I made contact myself with UNITES	5	3	1	1	6	1	12	7
Friend/family member outside workplace encouraged me to join	9	5	10	15	79	13	98	5
I joined on-line	5	3	5	7	13	2	23	4
I sent form to UNITES office	13	7	9	13	21	3	43	3
I joined at UNITES meeting	13	7	8	12	13	2	34	1

may indicate that UNITES was more likely to attract employees who remained with the same employer for a longer period. Around 70 per cent of respondents in domestic and third-parties were engaged purely in call centre work. In captives, however, 67 per cent combined call centre with other business process work. Over 70 per cent overall reported primarily receiving inbound sales, technical or general customer service calls rather than being engaged in outbound telesales. Night shifts were most common in Indian third-parties at 35 per cent of that sub-sample.

**4 Findings**

We now present our findings regarding joining UNITES, working conditions in the ITES-BPO industry and recruitment related problems.

**4.1 Joining UNITES**

We discuss the joining process, the reasons for joining, employee perceptions of management and of the role of HR.

**4.1.1 Joining Process**

The youth of the workforce and the fact that almost all were graduates means that very few respondents had been union members before joining UNITES. Recruitment from domestic companies appears to be the primary source of new membership, with the majority recruited in the last year (Table 2). Those with longest periods of membership tended to be from Indian third party operators, but the rate of recruitment has slowed. Encouragingly, the overwhelming majority found the process of joining easy. Only 11 per cent overall reported difficulties that were largely attributed to lack of awareness of UNITES’ existence or of direct contact with the organisation.

Members’ awareness of UNITES came primarily from friends or relatives, either in the same workplace or working in different ITES-BPO firms. Here, there was some difference between recent and older members, with recent recruits more likely to report workplace colleagues and older members, friends/relatives in other call centres. Making due allowance for the differing national contexts, the findings confirm knowledge of union growth in UK call centres, where the key role of workplace representatives as recruiters stands out [Bain and Taylor 2002].

Following “workplace members/colleagues” and “friends/family elsewhere” as sources of information were the UNITES web site and leaflets. This was especially so for more recent members. Other sources, such as newspaper advertisements or articles, emails, radio/television programmes or specific campaigns were cited by only handfuls of respondents. It seems that forms of remote contact and individuals taking the initiative to join (joining on-line, posting a form) are much less important. Surprisingly and perhaps an issue of some concern is the fact that only small numbers reported joining at UNITES meetings. When asked what UNITES could do to improve recruitment, a higher profile and greater media coverage were mentioned. Several stressed how successful UNITES has been in its early days in gaining publicity through the much-publicised Pratibha and BelAir cases but that recently declining media coverage had reduced

public awareness. This was hampering attempts to build UNITES and needed to be rectified.

#### 4.1.2 Reasons for Joining UNITES

While employees join UNITES for multiple reasons, the most frequently cited were primarily instrumental (Table 3). In particular, 77 per cent identified UNITES as helping to improve pay and other conditions. For members in those companies where collective agreements exist, joining the union might be directly related to UNITES' ability to improve pay and other conditions. However, where collective bargaining does not exist, as for example in captives, the importance of this reason (81 per cent) may be interpreted differently. Interview evidence reveals several instances where UNITES had intervened on behalf of employees over pay-related grievances (for example withholding pay/bonuses, unpaid overtime, underpaying). Others expressed the view that, while UNITES would not impact pay rates in the short-term, its future ability to do so influenced their decision to join. Two-thirds cited UNITES' ability to provide information or advice about rights as a reason for joining.

One-in-three overall saw joining UNITES as assisting in career development, a proportion that rises to one-in-two for members in captives. Additionally, members reported the importance of UNITES providing training that would enhance "skills and knowledge". For members in captives particularly (67 per cent), joining UNITES enabled them to access information on pay and conditions across ITES-BPO. Clearly, these findings resonate with arguments stressing the importance of ITES-BPO employees' professionalism and aspirant careerism. Nevertheless, the data also provides evidence of a trade union orientation. As many as 62 per cent in captives stated that one reason for joining was that they believed in trade unions, although this was less pronounced amongst members

**Table 3: Reasons for Joining UNITES**

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Improve my pay and conditions	155	81	27	40	472	77	654	77
Information/advice about my rights	133	69	25	37	407	66	565	66
Help my career	96	50	18	27	205	33	319	33
I believe in trade unions	119	62	16	24	195	32	330	32
Other people at work are members	102	53	35	52	149	24	286	24
UNITES provides training to enhance my skills and knowledge	100	52	19	28	135	22	254	22
UNITES will help me find out about pay/conditions in other workplaces	129	67	21	31	133	22	283	22
In UNITES I found people with the same attitudes	107	56	28	42	131	21	266	21
BPO professionals should have their own independent organisation to represent their interests	101	53	28	42	111	18	240	18
I wanted to help improve conditions in the industry	95	49	18	27	83	13	196	13
UNITES gave me support with a problem at work	109	57	39	58	68	11	216	11
UNITES campaigns to improve conditions in BPO	101	53	25	37	62	10	188	10
UNITES' community activities	134	70	16	24	52	8	202	8
UNITES provides housing/welfare information	100	52	19	28	42	7	161	7
UNITES provides good social activities	93	48	14	21	24	4	131	4

in third parties and domestics. Further, a majority in captives and slightly less than a majority in third parties believed that ITES-BPO professionals should have their own organisation to represent their interests. Collective impulses emerge also when we consider that a majority of members in captives and third parties report that they joined because "other people at work are members".

There are some differences between members' attitudes across the sub-sectors. Those in third parties were more likely to have joined because others in their workplace were members, or that UNITES would support them over a specific work problem. Those in captives were more likely to cite UNITES community activities. Also notable is that those in domestic companies were less likely to relate to the attitudinal or value-based reasons for joining, such as the belief that ITES-BPO professionals should have an independent organisation to represent their interests.

#### 4.1.3 Respondents' Perceptions of Management

Space constraints prohibit full dissemination of perceptions of management with respect to operational effectiveness and members' general attitudes. Firstly, management was seen as particularly unsuccessful in the following respects: listening to employees' ideas (73 per cent very/quite unsuccessful), understanding job pressures (71 per cent), managing call-volumes (71 per cent), preventing excessive work pressure (71 per cent), providing career progression (70 per cent), varying tasks (69 per cent), involving employees in target-setting (68 per cent) being sensitive to family/personal responsibilities (67 per cent), involving employees in decisions that affect them (65 per cent), fair allocation of tasks (64 per cent), providing sufficient training (62 per cent) and fair treatment of the workforce (60 per cent). Domestic operators consistently received the lowest ratings and third party operators the highest. These perceptions of managerial ineffectiveness suggest ways in which UNITES, through raising issues of equity and fairness, may potentially enhance its status as providing a voice for employees. Evidently, where members can act openly there may be opportunities to champion employee interests at the workplace level. This need not always involve adversarial representations but could form part of a broader initiative intended to persuade employers that involving employees may enhance performance. At a national scale, UNITES could judiciously highlight instances, which reveal the democratic deficit in Indian ITES-BPO in order to advance the case for employee representation. Approaches that are employer-friendly in tone and those which expose malpractice and injustice could be utilised at both scales.

Secondly, attitudes to management in general reveal a scepticism that challenges the belief in the universal prevalence of unitarist values. For example, as many as 97 per cent overall agreed/agreed strongly that management is only interested in statistics and efficiency and only 28 per cent that management has the welfare of employees at heart. Arguably, in joining UNITES members have already expressed to some degree certain values and attitudes at variance with those of their employers. Nevertheless, the fact that, for example, there is widespread disagreement (71 per cent) with the statement that management and employees have common interests does indicate that this cohort has attitudinal characteristics at least compatible with collectivisation [Bain et al 2004]. How far

these attitudes extend throughout the workforce cannot be answered here and would constitute a valuable subject for further research.

**4.1.4 Respondents’ Perceptions of Role of HR**

As might be expected from a survey of UNITES members, a small number (16 per cent) believed that the presence of HR removed the need for trade unions, yet this overall finding conceals significant variations. While only 10 per cent of domestic members consider that HR obviated the need for unions, this proportion rose to 28 per cent for captive members and 44 per cent for those in third parties (Table 4). Furthermore, while only 15 per cent in domestics had turned to HR to get problems resolved, 32 per cent in third parties and 43 per cent in captives had done so. Such figures reflect differences in HR practice between the ITES-BPO segments. From interviews and other evidence it is clear that HR practice is far less developed in the domestic sub-sector than in captives and third parties. Of those respondents who had turned to HR to seek the resolution of problems, those in captives and third parties were considerably more positive about HR’s success than those in domestics. Most strikingly, only 7 per cent of domestic members thought HR had successfully taken action to resolve their problems compared to 40 per cent of captive and 59 per cent of third party members. From another perspective, though, these figures indicate that a majority of members in captives (60 per cent) and a sizeable minority in third parties (41 per cent) who turned to HR did not have their problems resolved to their satisfaction. Furthermore, for those who had not turned to HR with a problem, the two most frequent responses were to do nothing (55 per cent captives, 27 per cent third parties) or to seek support from friends and personal networks (23 per cent captives, 25 per cent third parties). The latter suggests a potential role for UNITES either in providing advice or in advocacy to

the extent that it can become embedded in social networks within companies.

Sophisticated and effective HR practices do not prevail in international-facing centres. Budhwar et al (2006) emphasise limitations in career progression, development and retention policies, while focused sessions at Nasscom conferences have been dominated by discussions of the need to develop coherent HR management approaches in place of existing adhoc practices [Taylor and Bain 2006b]. Recalling the telling critique of HR management as it emerged in the UK, there is often a contradiction between “rhetoric” and “reality” [Legge 2004], with sufficient evidence to question the notion that human resource departments and their supposedly increasingly sophisticated policies have the effect of “rendering unions redundant” [Noronha and d’Cruz 2006: 2118].

**4.2 Working Conditions**

The findings presented in Table 5 (p 43) are important because they are the responses of UNITES members as they reflect upon the working conditions that are most likely to prompt their non-member colleagues to join. The results should provide some indication of the issues that UNITES might focus upon in order to extend its membership base.

The most significant issue was that of working times. This was cited by 65 per cent overall as being very important in prompting members to join. This category of “working times” has several aspects to it. It can include shift length, night-time working and the effects on well-being. It is also closely associated with issues related to travel-to-work times. As we can see, this was explicitly cited by 47 per cent as very important.

Following “working times” in terms of overall importance were concerns about the security of employees, which remain prominent despite claimed improvements in companies’ practices after Pratibha Murthy’s murder. In fact, UNITES has led other campaigns in Delhi and in Bangalore following road “accidents” involving ITES-BPO employees. Companies’ responsibility for providing safe transportation is obviously an enduring issue as far as UNITES members are concerned.

Given the industry’s continued growth, it is perhaps surprising that so many (62 per cent overall) consider colleagues’ concerns over job security to be very important as potentially prompting employees to join. From the questionnaire responses, the evidence from UNITES members suggests that anxieties over job security are more prevalent amongst employees in the domestic sub-sector than in the captive or third-party segments. In interviews, a number of employees in captives and third-parties expressed the belief that the Indian ITES-BPO industry might be potentially vulnerable to competition from other low-cost geographies or to decisions by companies in developed economies to repatriate services and processes.

Interview evidence also suggests that the cause of some members’ fears over job security might lie as much in management’s treatment of individual workers and their sense of vulnerability, particularly in SMEs and domestics, than wider concerns that the industry in general might be affected by downsising or closures. In this sense, members are reporting on their colleagues’ individual sense of insecurity.

**Table 4: Respondents’ Perceptions of the Role of HR**

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
The presence of HR to solve problems removes the need for trade unions (% Yes)	49	28	28	44	60	10	137	16
I turned to HR to get problems resolved (% Yes)	75	43	20	32	89	15	184	22
HR’s success at making themselves available to listen to problems <sup>a</sup>	69	56	27	68	113	19	209	28
HR’s success at listening to and understanding problems <sup>a</sup>	65	53	26	65	107	18	198	27
HR’s success at taking actions that solve problems <sup>a</sup>	49	40	23	59	43	7	115	15
How did you deal with your problems?								
I did nothing	80	55	24	27	429	43	533	43
I sought support from my friends and personal network inside the company	34	23	22	25	68	7	124	10
I sought support from my friends and personal network outside the company	10	7	15	17	136	14	161	13
I tried to ignore the problems/ think differently about them	10	7	6	7	135	14	151	12
I decided to quit and look for another job	5	3	11	13	138	14	154	12

<sup>a</sup> Represents % answering very/quite successful of the 184 who turned to HR.

Pay was seen by almost one-in-two of members overall (46 per cent) as an aspect of working conditions that would be very important in prompting their non-union colleagues to join UNITES. Again, there was some difference between the industry segments. More than half of respondents working in “captive” centres saw pay as very important compared to less than one-in-three of members in third party centres. Given that the dominant assumption is that ITES-BPO employees are very satisfied with their salaries, this is an interesting finding. It suggests concerns over pay may be more widespread than might be imagined. Some of the interviewees reported that one of the consequences of the boom in Tier 1 cities has been a steep rise in living costs, notably accommodation. Bonus and benefits issues were also identified although to a lesser extent.

**Table 5: Work Conditions Prompting Employees to Join UNITES (% “very important”)**

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Working times	104	55	37	57	419	68	560	65
Security of employees, e.g. transport	87	46	34	54	423	70	544	64
Job insecurity	97	52	24	37	410	67	531	62
The need for employee voice	117	64	22	35	363	60	502	59
Travel to work times	88	47	22	34	294	48	404	47
Pay	92	51	21	32	284	46	397	46
Targets	86	46	31	50	267	44	384	45
Health and safety issues	116	63	31	48	243	40	390	45
Pressure of work	94	50	29	45	220	36	343	40
Bonuses and other benefits	80	43	30	46	209	34	319	37
Management goes back on promises	72	39	22	34	222	36	316	37
Demanding supervisor	59	32	19	30	172	28	250	29
“Apple polishing” (favouritism)	35	20	17	27	137	23	189	22
Employers making it difficult to leave for another job	49	26	22	34	76	13	147	17

**Table 6: Degree of Pressure Felt on Normal Working Day (% Quite/Very Pressurised)**

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Inbound calls	46	48	13	39	325	82	384	73
Outbound calls	28	93	3	50	144	80	175	81
Women	33	42	4	19	273	87	310	75
Men	49	45	16	38	194	66	259	59
Total sample	82	44	20	31	475	77	577	66

Mention must be made of the task-related concerns of pressure of work and targets, which employees have long complained about in UK call centres [Taylor and Bain 2001; Bain et al 2002] as well as of supervisory pressure. Around one-in-two of members believed that both these factors would be issues prompting their colleagues to join. Further, while 45 per cent overall thought that issues relating to health and safety would prompt colleagues to join, as many as 63 per cent in captive centres and 48 per cent in third-party centres thought this was very important. Perhaps the higher percentages in international facing centres is a reflection of the fact that health and safety concerns are more likely to arise in centres where night shift working occurs.

More than one-in-three of respondents across all industry segments believed that the fact that management goes back on its promises was very important in prompting their non-member colleagues to join UNITES. Favouritism by managers was seen to

be an issue prompting employees to join by slightly more than a fifth of respondents.

The findings also provide some evidence of the importance of employers restraining employees’ ability to leave employment for another job. While only 13 per cent of members in domestic centres reported that this was an important factor that might prompt non-members to join, this percentage doubled (26 per cent) for members in captives and rose to one-in-three (34 per cent) for members in third parties. It would appear that leaving or relieving certificates remains an issue of concern for at least a minority of employees.

Finally, it is necessary to consider the belief in the general importance of the need for employee voice. Almost six-in-ten overall thought that this would be a very important reason in prompting employees to join. However, differences were expressed between members in the different industry sub-sectors. Members in captives (64 per cent) were more likely to see this as a very important reason leading non-members to join as compared to those in domestic centres (60 per cent) and third party centres (35 per cent).

Two-thirds of all respondents reported that they were either “very” or “quite pressurised” as a result of their work on a normal day (Table 6). Nevertheless, there were notable differences according to sub-sector, gender and nature of calls as far as voice agents were concerned. Respondents in the domestic segment were more likely to report being pressurised. No fewer than 77 per cent stated that they felt “very” or “quite pressurised” on a normal day. This compares to 44 per cent in captives and 31 per cent in third party centres. Women were more likely to report being pressurised and handling outbound calls was more likely to be a source of pressure.

The greatest source of pressure identified was “having to meet targets” with almost nine-in-ten overall reporting that this contributed “a great deal” or “to some extent” to the pressure of work. It would appear that this source of pressure was experienced most acutely by those in Indian third party (92 per cent) and domestic centres (89 per cent). This finding confirms what we know already about call centre environments in developed countries (the UK specifically) and in India [Bain et al 2002; Taylor and Bain 2001; Taylor et al 2002; Taylor et al 2003].

Call queuing or waiting is a particularly acute source of pressure in the Indian third party sub-sector (98 per cent) and captives (90 per cent). Not enough time between calls, difficult customers, repetitiveness of calls, having to keep to a script, always having to “smile down the phone” and call monitoring are lesser but far from insignificant, sources of pressure which are reported with greater frequency by respondents in both third parties and captives (in that order) than by members in domestic centres.

Additional sources of pressure appear to be more acutely felt in the international facing operations (both captives and third parties) than in domestics. These include turnaround times, not enough breaks, breaks not long enough, fear of making mistakes, not given enough information to do the job, difficulty with screen menus/software, physical discomfort at the workstation, not enough time to talk to colleagues and problems associated with hearing customers and also being heard by them.



Mention must be made of the relative importance of particular items. Travelling times to and from work obviously remains a major source of pressure facing employees in all sectors of the industry. If anything, it is experienced as even more of a problem by employees in the domestic sub-sector. These are related both to the overstrained infrastructure in the major ITES-BPO locations, which generates the widely acknowledged traffic congestion problems and to the system for transporting employees to and from their workplaces, which has the effect of lengthening travel times.

**Table 7: Aspects of Work Contributing to Pressure** ('A Great Deal' and 'To Some Extent' Combined%)

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Having to meet targets	139	78	55	92	540	89	734	87
Travelling times to and from work	135	78	32	65	508	86	675	83
Number of calls queuing/waiting	127	90	45	98	450	77	622	80
Working evening/night shifts	109	65	36	69	395	67	540	67
Turnaround times	123	69	43	77	310	53	476	58
Pressure from a supervisor	120	69	37	69	309	52	466	57
Not enough breaks	122	69	35	69	257	43	414	51
Difficult customers	83	48	38	81	251	42	372	45
Inadequate staffing levels	105	63	29	66	204	34	338	42
Not enough time between calls	102	64	36	75	193	33	331	42
Breaks not long enough	118	69	34	71	180	31	332	41
Repetitiveness of calls I handle	84	52	30	67	205	34	319	40
Fear of making mistakes	109	66	33	61	178	30	320	39
Monotony/repetitiveness of job	78	47	34	76	185	31	297	37
Having to keep to a script	90	54	36	75	157	27	283	35
Making sure my accent is acceptable	68	40	30	64	170	29	268	33
Having to work as part of a team	89	51	37	73	142	24	268	33
Not given enough information to do the job	79	47	33	65	151	26	263	32
Difficulty with screen menus/software	84	50	31	69	131	22	246	31
Physical discomfort at work station	78	45	32	60	123	21	233	29
Not being understood by the customer	57	34	31	63	147	25	235	29
Not understanding the customer	71	42	28	58	100	17	199	25
Not enough time to talk to colleagues	82	49	31	63	87	15	200	25
Making sure my spoken English is accurate	67	44	36	75	92	15	195	24
Always having to "smile down the phone"	73	42	30	63	89	15	192	24
Call monitoring	77	45	32	73	78	13	187	23

Working evening or night shifts was also seen as a major source of pressure, being experienced to the same degree across the different sub-sectors of the industry. Supervisory pressure and inadequate staffing, underscoring the "lean" model, were identified by relatively large numbers as a source of pressure.

Conformity with linguistic protocols is a source of greater pressure in both captives and third parties than in domestic centres. "Making sure my accent is acceptable" was reported as contributing to pressure of work by 64 per cent in third parties and 40 per cent in captives as opposed to 29 per cent in domestic centres. It is less of a surprise to find an even greater difference in respect of "making sure my spoken English is accurate". As many as 75 per cent in Indian third parties, and

44 per cent in captives, reported this as contributing to the pressure of work compared to a mere 15 per cent of respondents in domestic centres.

When asked to identify additional sources of pressure, many mentioned not having enough time to spend with family and children, and others further emphasised the pressure from team leaders and manager to achieve targets.

### 4.3 Recruitment Related Problems Facing UNITES

From the standpoint of UNITES, as it attempts to develop its membership base, it helps to identify the issues that its members believe are preventing non-member colleagues from joining (Table 8).

Looking at the "exclusivist" category, the most frequent perceived obstacle in the way of increasing recruitment to UNITES is the fact that companies are opposed to UNITES. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents overall saw this as a very important problem, although slightly fewer in Indian third party and captive centres (48 per cent and 49 per cent respectively) did so than in domestic centres (60 per cent). Fifty-four per cent overall considered that the fear that companies might terminate someone for joining UNITES was a very important problem. The perception of this problem was most pronounced amongst respondents in domestic centres (60 per cent) and less so amongst those in captives (45 per cent) and third party centres (25 per cent). In addition, 45 per cent overall believed that joining UNITES would affect their careers. Again, this was more frequently expressed by respondents in domestic centres (52 per cent) than by those in Indian third party

**Table 8: Main Problems Facing UNITES Over Recruitment** (% answering 'very important')

	Captive		Indian Third Party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Companies are opposed to UNITES	94	49	30	48	364	60	488	57
High salaries mean that employees do not need to join UNITES	105	58	16	24	367	60	490	57
Fear that companies might terminate someone for joining UNITES	80	45	16	25	362	60	458	54
BPO employees see themselves as professionals	82	44	23	35	363	60	468	54
Much of the workforce is young and inexperienced	80	45	16	24	355	59	451	53
High attrition makes it hard to recruit and build a stable membership	63	34	21	32	328	54	412	48
Many BPO employees do not believe in trade unions	76	42	22	34	306	50	404	47
Employees think that joining UNITES will affect their careers	40	22	28	42	317	52	385	45
Employees believe that the employer is all they need	91	49	20	31	213	35	324	38
Many BPO professionals do not see the need for UNITES	56	31	19	29	242	40	317	37
Many BPO professionals think that they will be promoted	74	41	23	35	191	32	288	34
Employees believe that any problems they have will be solved by managers	85	47	6	9	189	31	280	33
Unions in BPO are seen as damaging to the Indian industry's growth	18	10	21	32	179	29	218	26
Employers have captured the "hearts and minds" of employees	35	19	23	35	64	11	122	14

Statements rated on four-point scale.

operations (42 per cent) and captives (22 per cent). These are very important findings, suggesting that large numbers of employees believe that they will be penalised by their employers for joining UNITES (Table 8).

Interview data illustrates members' perceptions of ITES-BPO employers' explicit anti-unionism. Of considerable interest is the testimony of the member who maintained UNITES' web site who reported how many employees when they contacted the organisation might say, "Can I join in secret?" or "I am a member but please do not let it be known that I am a member". Fears were expressed that employees would be "terminated" if their membership became known to management. Therefore, contrary to the official portrayal of a universally benign employment experience, there is evidence of a relatively widespread fear of punitive measures being taken against employees who either voice their concerns or express an interest in joining a union.

Given the evidence of perceptions of the reluctance of employees to join UNITES for fear of reprisals including being sacked, it is necessary to reflect upon the pertinent International Labour Organisation conventions. Firstly, there is convention 87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise) and convention 98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining). At the very least, many employees in the ITES-BPO industry would appear to believe that these rights do not apply and it seems that employers are not making efforts to ensure that employees are appraised of their rights.

Turning to the inclusivist obstacles listed, Table 8 demonstrates that the most significant of these relates to the effects of high salaries. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents overall reported that high salaries meant that employees believed that they did not need to join UNITES. While there was little difference in the responses of domestic members (60 per cent) and those in captives (58 per cent) far fewer in third parties (24 per cent) believed this was a very important factor. Next in order of importance (54 per cent overall) was the perception that ITES-BPO employees see themselves as professionals. Again this was seen as a very important problem by more respondents in domestic centres (60 per cent) than in captives (44 per cent) and third party centres (35 per cent).

Most of the remaining inclusivist obstacles (employees believe that the employer is all they need, many ITES-BPO professionals do not see the need for UNITES or think that they will be promoted or believe that their problems will be solved by their managers) were seen to be very important by around one-in-three of respondents overall. For most items the differences between the sub-samples were not considerable, except in relation to last of these. Only 9 per cent of respondents in third parties believed that the successful solving of employees' problems by managers was a very important problem.

Coming to structural characteristics of the ITES-BPO industry, the youth and inexperience of the workforce was considered to be very important by 59 per cent of respondents overall. The question of

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high attrition making it hard to recruit and build a stable membership requires some discussion. While almost one-in-two (54 per cent) in domestic centres perceived this to be very important as a problem facing UNITES, around one-in-three in both captives (34 per cent) and third parties (32 per cent) did so. This resonates with what we know already of the tendency amongst many employees in the domestic sub-sector to treat their current employment as a stepping-stone to the more prestigious and higher-paying international-facing centres. Clearly, intense labour turnover has contradictory effects as far as the potential for developing collective organisation and UNITES are concerned for, on the one hand, labour is placed in a potentially strong bargaining position but, on the other hand, employees tend to pursue individual means to capitalise on relative scarcity.

Considering the more overtly ideological difficulties facing UNITES, almost half the respondents (47 per cent) thought that the fact that their many ITES-BPO employees do not believe in unions was a very important problem. Only a quarter (26 per cent) of respondents thought that the fact that unions are seen as damaging the Indian industry's growth was a very important problem.

## 5 Conclusions

The evidence is unequivocal that there is a constituency for UNITES in Indian ITES-BPO, notwithstanding contradictory attitudes amongst ITES-BPO employees, the opposition of employers and the benefits of the job. It needs to be emphasised that what has been captured in this survey are the attitudes of employees who have already indicated through their identification with UNITES that there is a need for some kind of independent employee representation. Of course, we cannot generalise these findings to the entire population of the ITES-BPO workforce. Yet,

the host of grievances reported here, from the seemingly trivial indignities of favouritism to the more heavy handed arbitrariness of supervisory and managerial treatment or to material grievances related to pay and workload or even to profound concerns over safety, suggest that these are widespread throughout India's ITES-BPO industry. They may be experienced with differing intensity and regularity depending on the sub-sector or company in which employees are engaged but they are nonetheless prevalent.

UNITES has made genuine progress, albeit limited by its youth and inexperience, in recruiting from the virgin workforces of Indian ITES-BPO. For UNITES to remain relevant, it must continue to deepen and broaden its membership base and to develop clusters of self-reliant members in workplaces and across companies. The broader task facing UNITES is how to reconcile the tension between the requirement to reflect the professional aspirations of its members and the need to act more overtly as a trade union in the making. It is only through experience that UNITES will be able to develop the understanding of what tactics are appropriate in a particular set of circumstances. Indeed, UNITES is developing agendas that can advance the interests of its professional members whilst simultaneously demonstrating the constructive role it can play in representing employees. Further, particularly in relation to the captive segment, developments within India can in part be shaped by external developments, by the actions and interventions of unions in the global north and of global federations [Taylor and Bain 2008a,b]. Where trade union recognition exists in developed countries, attempts can be made to extend arrangements to India either directly or through global framework agreements. At the very least, UNITES can benefit hugely from external union support, information exchanges and reciprocal visits.

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