

**Union Formation in Indian Call Centres/BPO –
The Attitudes and Experiences of UNITES Members**



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Contents

	Page
1. Introduction	3
1.1 Employer Opposition to Trade Unions in Indian BPO	3
1.2 The Formation of UNITES	4
2. Aims and Objectives of the Report	7
2.1 Principal Aims	7
2.2 Specific Objectives	
3. The Indian BPO Industry – Background and Context	9
3.1 The Globalisation of Business Services	9
3.2 India’s Pre-eminence as BPO Destination	9
3.3 A Brief History of the Indian BPO Industry	10
3.4 The BPO Market Today	11
4. The BPO Workforce and Conditions of Work	16
5. Sources and Methods	19
5.1 Questionnaire Design	19
5.2 Questionnaire Distribution	19
5.3 Employee Interviews	19
6. Research Findings	21
6.1 Profile of Respondents	21
6.2 The Process of Recruitment	22
6.3 Reasons for Joining UNITES	24
6.4 Work Conditions Prompting Colleagues to Join UNITES	28
6.5 Degree of Pressure Felt on a Normal Working Day	31
6.6 Aspects of Work Which Contribute to Pressure	31
6.7 Work/non-work Relationship and Work-Life Balance	34
6.8 Perceptions of Management Effectiveness	36
6.9 Attitudes to Management in General	38
6.10 HR as Substitute for Independent Employee Representation	39
6.11 Perceived Obstacles to Joining UNITES	41
7. Conclusions	46

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1. Introduction

The point of departure for this report, and the research project from which it derives, is the question of trade unionism in Indian BPO (Business Process Outsourcing). We set the scene, firstly, by outlining both the employers' and industry opposition to the emergence of trade unionism in Indian BPO and, secondly, by summarising the development of UNITES Pro (the Union of Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals) as an organisation seeking to represent the interests of the nascent BPO workforce.

1.1 Employer Opposition to Trade Unions in Indian BPO

The spectacular growth of the Indian call centre/BPO industry has thrust to the fore issues of working conditions and employee rights. In particular, the question of whether an independent organisation is required to represent employees in Indian BPO has emerged as an important matter for debate.

The position of Nasscom (National Association of Software and Service Companies), the employers' organisation for the ITES-BPO (Information Technology Enabled Services-Business Process Outsourcing) industry, has been consistent, dismissing trade unions as unnecessary in the Indian context on grounds summarised by its 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 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.

Commentators have highlighted how the implementation of sophisticated human resource management policies and practices has created a 'productively docile' workforce (Ramesh, 2004a). From the perspective of employees, human resource departments are held to act as a 'substitute' 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.

While there is some evidence of a less positive experience of work (see Section 4), it is commonly held that call centre/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 CEOs (Chief Executive Officer) of Indian third-party companies have publicly declared that unionism should be opposed because their presence would dissuade clients from sourcing from India. For example, Neeraj Bhargava, the CEO of WNS Global Services has argued,

Unionisation will drive away customers and kill the golden goose. (*Times of India*, 4 December 2005)

Azim Premji, the CEO of Wipro, has warned that the demand for a union would negatively affect India's image of effectiveness in the global economy (cited in Sandhu, 2006: 4319). In other words, it is being argued that the presence of trade unions in Indian BPO would damage the interests of the industry and, by implication, threaten the opportunities and job security of employees. This position appears to be quite representative of the Indian third-party sub-sector.

Second, many of the multinational corporations that operate captive facilities in India or act as business service providers (e.g. IBM) have industrial relations histories which have displayed an opposition to trade unionism.

Third, it is necessary to acknowledge that many UK and European companies to 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. In this context, illustrative examples can be provided by UK financial services (Prudential, Lloyds/TSB, Royal and Sun Alliance, Barclays), the telecommunications sector (British Telecom/BT), UK domestic outsourcers (Capita and Vertex) and European companies (Siemens Business Services and ABN-AMRO). While it is not being argued here 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 BPO.

Taking these factors together – *inter alia* the opposition of Nasscom and employers, the claimed harmony of working conditions, career opportunities, generous pay and rewards and employees' professional identity – the official industry view suggests that unions are both unwelcome and unnecessary in Indian BPO. Furthermore, it implies that attempts to establish an independent employees' organisation would be destined to fail. However, as we now see, for a minority of employees at least the establishment of precisely such an organisation (UNITES) has been a welcome initiative providing them with a voice and a body to represent their interests.

1.2 The Formation of UNITES

UNITES Pro (the Union of Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals) was formed in September 2005 on foundations laid from 2004 by CBPOP (the Centre for Business Processing Outsourcing Professionals). CBPOP had emerged organically as a network of call centre/BPO professionals who believed they needed their own

organisation to represent them and advance their interests. CBPOP/UNITES was thus distinct from the ITPF (the Information Technology Professionals Forum), an organisation which had oriented more specifically on software/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 BPO was grounded in the understanding that employees' conditions of work were sufficiently distinct from those of IT (Information Technology) 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. In this sense, UNITES was an innovative organising project oriented on the professional aspirations of its constituency in the so-called 'new economy'. 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, which would neither progress the interests of the industry nor attract members.

A UNITES officer interviewed by one of the report's authors at the founding conference emphasised, 'If we talk only about unionism, it's going to be a waste of time...we need to talk about a knowledge professionals' forum' (*Interview*, 11.09.05). Yet, notwithstanding the declared commitment to work in partnership with BPO companies, 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 call centre/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 INTUC (Indian National Trade Union Congress). It now has organising centres and claims viable 'chapters' in six areas (Bangalore, Hyderabad, New Delhi/NCR (National Capital Region), Chennai, Mumbai and Kochi).

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 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 in December 2005 of Prathibha Srikanth Murthy, a young women employed by Hewlett Packard (HP) Globalsoft Services in Bangalore. She had been collected from her house on the pretext of being driven to HP for the start of her 2.30 am shift. This horrific crime galvanised public opinion and raised many important issues, most pertinently corporate responsibility for the safety of, particularly women, employees. The initial response by HP's CEO, Som Mittal, then of Nasscom's Executive Council

http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/pIe/full_story.php?content_id=84118), and now incoming President, was to insist that the ‘unfortunate incident’ had ‘nothing to do with the company’ Mittal also stated that ‘the element of risk is always there’ and asked ‘what precautionary measures can be taken against a suicide bomber?’. The callous indifference exposed by these remarks provoked protests in which UNITES was prominent, participating in demonstrations, building meetings, organising condolences for Prathibha’s family and contributing to debates on improving transportation safety which detailed employers’ responsibilities. 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. To provide but one example, UNITES has pursued through the Karnataka Women’s Commission the case of a woman employed by an Indian third-party provider who had been ‘put on the bench’ (suspended without pay).

In addition, to date, UNITES has 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 SMEs (small and medium enterprises) in the domestic sector and the aim of securing collective bargaining in international facing operations has yet to be realised. Nevertheless, UNITES has undeniably succeeded in recruiting clusters of members in the captive operations of multinational corporations.

In sum, then, on the limited evidence to date of UNITES early activities, it seems clear that it has established a genuine, if limited, presence in Indian BPO. To the extent that it has done so, it raises questions concerning Nasscom and the industry’s assertion that the independent representation of employees is unnecessary and unwanted in the Indian BPO environment.

Significantly, UNITES appears to have made progress by virtue of a twin-track approach; firstly, reflecting the professional and careerist aspirations of its constituency and, secondly, representing employees and members over a range of issues of justice, fairness and rights that the prevailing conditions of work and employment create. The evidence presented below will deepen our understanding of these issues and, amongst other important objectives, will enable us to evaluate the extent to which there is a genuine basis for the establishment of trade unionism in Indian BPO. We now elaborate the aims and objective of the study.

2. Aims and Objectives of Report

This report is the outcome of a collaborative research project between academics based in the Department of Human Resource Management at the Strathclyde Business School in Glasgow, United Kingdom (Professor Phil Taylor and Dr. Dora Scholarios) and at the Indian Institute of Management in Ahmedabad (Professor Ernesto Noronha and Dr. Premilla d’Cruz). Although this study cuts important new ground, it builds upon the several years’ of research conducted by three of the authors into the Indian BPO and latterly into the conditions, experiences and attitudes of its workforce and into the embryonic trade union initiatives taken to organise employees (d’Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Noronha and d’Cruz, 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2003; 2004; 2005; 2006a; 2006b).

2.1 Principal Aims

The principal aim is to fill an important gap in our knowledge by developing a greater understanding, than currently exists, of the attitudes and experiences of those working in the Indian BPO industry. What adds importance to this overall aim is the fact that, to date, the ability to make an assessment of worker perceptions of employment conditions and the impact of human resource management (HRM) policies and practices in Indian call centres has been constrained by the fact that little rigorous research has been conducted, although, as indicated above, preliminary, exploratory studies have been conducted by the authors.

The prism through which this exploration of working conditions and the attitudes and experiences of Indian BPO employees is undertaken is the membership of UNITES (Union for Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals). A key associated aim, then, is to understand the reasons why a sizable number of BPO employees have chosen to join an organisation that is seeking to provide employees with both a voice and independent representation.

2.2 Specific Objectives

- To understand the process by which employees come to join UNITES.
- To identify the reasons why BPO employees have chosen to join UNITES.
- To understand more fully members’ attitudes towards UNITES and trade unions in general.
- To evaluate the aspects of BPO professionals’ jobs and conditions of work that might make them want to join UNITES.
- To assess the extent to which BPO employees feel pressurised as a result of work and to explore in detail the perceived sources of pressure.
- To explore aspects of the relationship between work and non-work life, identifying issues relating to work-life balance.

- To evaluate employees' perceptions of the extent of management's effectiveness.
- To develop a greater understanding of the role of HR (human resources) in organisations and to evaluate the extent to which it is perceived as being able to solve employees' problems.
- To identify the obstacles facing UNITES, as reported by members, as it attempts to develop its membership base and to fill the representation gap.

Thus, both the overall aims and specific objectives of the research report are related to the wider issues raised in Section 1 above.

- ❖ Is it valid to assert, as Nasscom and BPO employers have done, that that an organisation providing independent employee representation is unnecessary in the Indian BPO space?
- ❖ Are companies able to satisfy all the needs of their workforces as is asserted?
- ❖ Is it the case that employees are universally indisposed to trade unionism?

In short, the report will investigate the broader claim that a body such as UNITES is unnecessary, as perceived by the employers, and unwanted, as perceived by employees.

We draw upon a unique dataset, a detailed questionnaire of UNITES members, which constitutes the first attempt to conduct a systematic survey of Indian BPO employees who are seeking an independent organisation to represent their interests as professionals and to ensure that they have a body able to voice their concerns. This quantitative data is combined with complementary evidence from extensive semi-structured interviews that enable us to drill deep into experiences and attitudes of UNITES members.

Before a detailed explication of data sources and methods in Section 5, we provide some essential contextualisation which helps us to interpret the research findings. In Section 3, we situate the development of Indian BPO in the broader globalisation of business services, provide a brief history and profile of the industry and highlight some salient issues in the current market. In Section 4, we provide a summary account of what is already known from diverse sources about working conditions in the Indian BPO industry.

3. The Indian BPO Industry in Context

3.1 The Globalisation of Business Services

In the space of scarcely a decade, the ‘globalisation’ of business services facilitated by Information and Consultation Technologies (ICTs) has accelerated at breathtaking pace. The relocation, both of interactive service work in the form mainly of voice-based call centres, and of a diverse and expanding range of back-office processes from the so-called developed global countries of the global north to the developing countries of the global south, has moved far beyond earlier experimental phases to constitute core elements in the strategies of an increasing number of companies (Huws and Flecker, 2004).

The increasing use of terms such as global service delivery (Nasscom, 2005; 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2006b) reflects the transformative role played by transnational corporations (TNCs) in extending the geographical scale of their supply chains. It also reflects the important role played by national states and regional governments in developing policies favourable to the attraction of foreign direct investment. The outcome is the reconfiguration of service supply chains to multiple geographies. In this rapidly unfolding global landscape a number of important, and many lesser destinations, have emerged.

3.2 India’s Pre-eminence as BPO Destination

While the Philippines, South Africa, Latin American and Eastern Europe states are emerging locations, there is no question that India remains the pre-eminent location for offshored and outsourced business activities. According to a recent, influential survey, India ‘still offers an unbeatable mix of low costs, deep technical and language skills, mature vendors and supportive government policies’ (Walker and Gott, 2007: 29). According to another influential report (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005), India accounts for 46% of all global Business Process Outsourcing.

The figures provided by Nasscom, the employers’ organisation for India’s ITES-BPO, are undeniably impressive. Indian ITES-BPO exports were estimated to have grown from \$6.3bn. in the financial year 2005-6 to \$8.4bn. in 2006-7, while revenue in domestic BPO grew from \$0.9bn. to \$1.2bn. in the same period (Nasscom, 2007a).

Direct employment in ITES-BPO and not including employment in the IT and software industry is calculated at 553,000 in FY 2006-7¹. Putting the employment figures for India into some comparative perspective, a recent (May 2007) report of employment levels for the second most important BPO global destination, the Philippines, was given as 160,000 call centre employees and perhaps another 60,000 for employees engaged in various back-office activities (Locsin, 2007).

Presenting figures provided by Nasscom (Table 1), the rapid growth of the ITES-BPO industry in India is obvious.

Table 1: Indian ITES-BPO Employment Levels

Financial Year	Employees ('000s)	% Year on year Increase
2001-2002	107	n/a
2002-2003	171	60
2003-2004 ^a	216	26
2004-2005 ^a	316	46
2005-2006	409	29
2006-2007 ^b	553	35

(Sources: Nasscom, 2007a; 2006: 73; 2003; 59)

^aThe totals have been recalculated to exclude certain service lines. ^bFigures presented at Nasscom ITES-BPO Strategy Summit in Bangalore in August 2007.

This fivefold increase in five years in Indian BPO employment levels is the statistical expression of the dramatic creation of a new Indian workforce, which forms part of a broader new international division of service labour. Inevitably, this growth has brought with it profound social, economic and geographical consequences. Particularly relevant for the focus of this report is the fact that the creation of this new industry and workforce raises important questions regarding working conditions and employment rights.

3.3 A Brief History of the Indian BPO Industry

It is not the intention here to provide a detailed history of the BPO industry in India, but a brief outline is necessary. The successful remote delivery of a range of IT and software services from India from the late 1980s (Carmel and Tija, 2005) laid the basis for the later development of the BPO industry.

Pioneering decisions were taken by US corporations, notably GE Capital and American Express, to migrate certain back-office processes between 1994 and 1996 and to situate facilities close to Delhi (Nasscom, 2002a; Taylor and Bain, 2003). Similar processes were conducted at British Airways' Mumbai operations, opened in 1994, and also in the centres of their predecessors in the airlines sector, Swissair, jointly owned by Tata and Lufthansa (Scope Marketing, 2001).

As the US economy continued to expand during the mid to late-1990s, the number of organisations situating 'captive' operations in India increased and those already present expanded their facilities. It was during these years that GE established its and India's first call centre voice operations alongside their back-office processing activities. Evidence that substantial cost savings could be realised provided the key stimulus for the subsequent expansion of the ITES-BPO industry as a whole, and in particular to the subsequent widespread development of call centres. Indian third-party providers followed on the heels of GE, and other captives and benefited from the quickened pace of investment in 1999-2000.

While much of the earlier migration of services to India from the US, either to captives or outsourcers, had been driven by overheating and tight labour markets in the US economy, the main driver of offshoring changed. As the economic downturn precipitated by the bursting of the dot.com bubble took hold, growing numbers of US companies, seeking to cut costs increasingly considered the possibility of outsourcing *and* offshoring to India. The growing perception was that educated English-speaking graduates were not only available in sufficient numbers but, crucially, their linguistic

capabilities were such that they could deliver customer services at high levels of quality. As one report on the Indian BPO industry put it, companies ‘*Went for Cost but Stayed for Quality*’ (Dossani and Kenny, 2006).

Constraints of space prevent a nuanced analysis of the complex of factors driving, facilitating and inhibiting business process migration (Taylor and Bain, 2003; 2004; 2006a). The promise of cost savings, though, were and remain fundamental. For several years, Nasscom (Nasscom, 2004; 2005a;b; 2006) claimed that cost savings in the range of 40-50% would be realised following migration. However, more conservative recent estimates suggest that levels of savings might have been reduced to around 25-40% savings (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005: 16).

To repeat, the most significant element in these economies is India’s outstanding asset: the comparatively low costs of its English-speaking workforce. In 2003, the wage differential was ‘70-80% for offshorable processes’ (Nasscom, 2003: 65). Yet, the evidence suggests that this has been reduced as average labour costs have risen by at least 10-15% p.a. over the last three years (Nasscom, 2006: 74) due to wage inflation in tight labour markets.

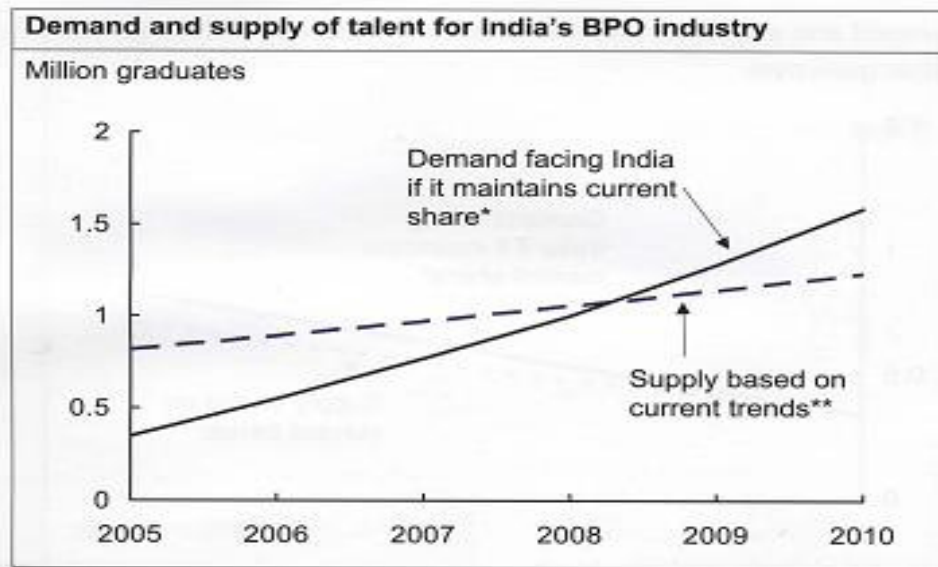
To these fundamental country advantages may be added several economic, political and infrastructural factors which have facilitated migration. Firstly, there is availability of reliable and cheapening telephony and telecommunicate connectivity. Secondly, it is necessary to place considerable emphasis on the role played by central government in advancing policies favourable to Foreign Direct Investment. Not least of these have been de-regulatory telecommunications policies and the extension to the BPO industry of the benefits previously afforded to the software/IT industry. These include a range of tax holidays and other benefits. Thirdly, there are the specific policies of the various state governments which have supplemented those of the national, union government. Fourthly, there has been the absolutely crucial role played by Nasscom in promoting the industry, lobbying and liaising with government, establishing industry regulatory standards and pursuing policies that advance the interests of BPO companies.

In sum, from the perspective of the Indian government, the BPO industry has become a key strategic component in the dynamic growth of India’s new economy, a vital source of foreign direct investment and exports.

3.4 The BPO Market Today

In what is unavoidably a highly abridged survey of market dynamics, emphasis must be placed upon the underlying imbalance in labour supply and demand (see Diagram 1), which is predicted to cause a shortfall of half a million BPO employees by 2010 (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005: 17). The outstripping of the supply of skilled human supply by demand is an inescapable underlying dynamic which profoundly affects almost all aspects of the industry. Although it is a problem generated by the industry’s frenetic pace of growth and is a mark of the industry’s success, it is no less of a concern for the industry. As a consequence of these shortages of higher-end linguistic capabilities, companies are experiencing intense labour management challenges in relation to recruitment, training and attrition.

Diagram 1: Projected excess of labour demand over supply



* 46% of offshore industry (2004)

** Taking into account suitability, accessibility and willingness to work in BPO of graduates

Source: McKinsey Global Institute; McKinsey Global Offshore Market Evolution Model

As a consequence, some geographical dispersion of facilities has occurred as companies have attempted to leverage lower costs and untapped sources of labour outside of the major metropolitan areas. Initially, the industry centred initially on the Tier 1 locations of the National Capital Region (NCR), Bangalore, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai (Taylor and Bain, 2005; 2006a). More remarkable is the fact that dense clusters have emerged within these conurbations; in Gurgaon and Noida (NCR), just outside the New Delhi city boundaries, in High Tech City on the outskirts of Hyderabad, and in Electronic City on the Hosur Road in Bangalore. In Mumbai, two notable clusters are Powai and Malad. The dynamics of growth, recruitment and attrition in these concentrations have produced conditions of overheating that have contributed to decisions to move to newer locations in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities.

Pune was the first Tier 2 city to emerge as a major BPO location as companies including Convergys, WNS, Progeon, EXL and Mphasis established operations. Examples of newer locations and the companies who have situated these operations recently include the following; Mangalore (Mphasis); Vishakhapatnam/Vizag (Satyam, Wipro, TCS, HSBC); Madurai (Honeywell); Nagpur (Krishna Group); Chandigarh (Infosys, IBM-Daksh); Jaipur (GE); Kochi (Wipro, OPI); Thiruvananthapuram (Infosys) (Nasscom, 2006: 94). Dell also has recently opened a facility in Chandigarh. Even cities such as Kolkota, hitherto regarded as a 'no-go' area for the BPO industry because of the Communist state government of West Bengal and the reputed frequency of *bandhs* (strikes), has become an accepted destination following the government's decision to welcome FDI (foreign direct investment) and develop the industry.

The main reasons why companies chose to site facilities in these Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities are summarised effectively by Nasscom,

To counter the supply gap, companies are tapping the talent available in smaller hubs outside the traditional hubs of IT-ITES activity. Besides the access to a supplemental talent pool these 'Tier II' cities also enable companies setting up their operations to support lower cost structures as people costs and facility costs – comprising nearly 60% of the cost base – are actually lower in these locations. (Nasscom, 2005a: 230)

However, such has been the pace of development that some Tier 2 cities have themselves 'overheated'.

Cities are at a breaking point, and further growth will have to come from entirely new business districts outside of Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005: 16)

Contrary to the received wisdom, despite 15 years education in the English language, India does not necessarily possess an inexhaustible supply of graduates with the necessary linguistic capability and depth of cultural understanding that are deemed acceptable by Indian providers and/or their western clients (Taylor and Bain, 2005). It has been estimated that only 10-15% of graduates have the requisite skills for direct employment (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005: 90) and that the industry then hires a mere 3-5 out of every 100 applicants. Considerable resources are devoted to linguistic training, in the form of the well-documented accent neutralisation programmes, and to cultural training in order to familiarise employees with key features of the geographies of their customer bases.

Attrition, though, remains the most enduring and pressing problem. Although officially running at 30-40% p.a. (Budhwar et al, 2006; Nasscom, 2006), the real rate is perhaps around 65-75% p.a. Nevertheless, averages conceal wide variations. It is known that the rate of attrition exceeds 100% in certain companies, in certain geographical locations and for particular processes. In general, it appears that labour turnover is higher in call centres than for non-voice processes, higher on night-time working for the US market than for the UK and most pronounced on the most routinised of processes (Taylor and Bain, 2006: 84-100). There is evidence too that attrition also tends to be higher in the domestic sub-sector where pay levels are lower and rewards packages are more limited. While the 'push' of unwelcome working conditions contributes to turnover, of greater significance are 'pull' factors. It has long been recognised that large numbers of employees (and managers) are moving between employers in order to gain improvements in their pay and rewards packages.

A profile of the ITES-BPO industry reveals characteristics that might impact further upon the potential for trade unionism. Firstly, there is the industry's heterogeneous structure as companies fall into several distinct categories. 'Captives', essentially in-house providers for global companies (e.g. HSBC, Dell, Hewlett Packard, Prudential), which directly own and control their operations and dominated the industry in its early years, remain pre-eminent, according to Nasscom (2005a: 90). Conventionally included in this category, although distinctive in key respects, are the multinational corporations (e.g. Hewitt, IBM, Accenture) that essentially act as third-party providers delivering services for their clients.

Both these types can be distinguished from Indian third-party providers which act as classic outsourcers. This diverse category encompasses both what are known as 'pure plays' and the BPO arms of software companies. That sharp distinctions cannot always be drawn between captives and third-party providers is evidenced most obviously by the metamorphosis of GE from the most significant captive operation in India, to a global third-party player Genpact.

Finally, it is important to take account of the more recent emergence and significant expansion in the domestic BPO sub-sector. It is estimated that total revenues in domestic BPO for 2006-7 were \$1.2bn, having risen from \$0.9bn in the previous year (Nasscom, 2007a: 79). The domestic sub-sector is an important development in the Indian context, reflecting the growth of new economy related consumerism and increasing telecommunications connectivity in swelling ranks of the middle class.

Differentiation in the structural composition extends to other aspects of the BPO industry and may carry additional implications for the ability to collectively organise the workforce. There is the question of scale. While prominent 'captives' and third-party suppliers have become very large operators indeed employing many thousands, and their facilities may accommodate several thousand employees, there remains a plethora of SME organisations, many in the domestic sub-sector, which conduct niche activities. For example, Batt et al's survey (2005: 7), although conducted some years ago, showed that international call centres were seven times larger than domestic operations.

There are the obvious distinctions in the types of work undertaken, with the most significant being that between call centre services and back office processes. Reviewing all available evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that voice services account for 60-65% of sectoral employment and the various back office activities for 35-40% (Taylor and Bain, 2006b: 22) although a proportion of employees are employed on both types of activity. This dissection of the broad types of work undertaken affords a suitable entry point into the broader related discussion of whether Indian BPO is rising up the value chain and performing work of greater complexity.

It has been demonstrated that the continued preponderance of voice services indicates (despite the exceptions of more complex customer service, help desk and technical support work and some cross-selling activity) that a *wholesale* move up the value chain and towards greater complexity has not yet occurred. Nor does it follow that non-voice processes necessarily can be equated with higher-value and complex work. This point was expressed effectively by the CEO of Indian third-party company, 24/7.

So there's an obsession in the media with what percentage is voice work and what percentage is non-voice work, in the hope that the percentages will reveal that we are going up the value chain. But having 80% of our revenues from non-voice does not mean that we are rising up the value chain... (P.V. Kannan, speech, 7 June 2005)

Many of the back-office processes involved in the burgeoning area of 'document management' are patently not high value and complex. Undeniably, 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 (KPO). However, the evidence strongly suggests that, in overall terms, the BPO industry in India, whether captive or third-party, and whether call centre or non-customer facing processes, still *tends* to provide largely standardised, routinised services of generally low complexity.

Migration involves either 'lift or shift', that is the exact replication of the processes, or their re-engineering, which entails a type of 'Taylorism through export', by which processes are further simplified. This fragmentation of processes into their most standardised essentials, part of the means by which control is exercised over the outsourced or offshored process, has important implications for work organisation and the experience of work (Batt et al, 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2005).

There are important differences too in the work timings as much back-office work is conducted during Indian daytime while voice processes in international centres (both captive and third-party) are synchronised to customers' times in the different English-speaking geographies served. The North American market accounts for perhaps 70% of Indian BPO's overseas business and Europe, principally the UK, accounts for around 20%. The result is a multiplicity of shift patterns which further fragments the construction of BPO work as a unified experience. In sum, this brief profile indicates that union organising efforts will have to engage with an industry and a workforce that are internally differentiated in important respects.

4. The BPO Workforce and the Conditions of Work

Notwithstanding differences between the industry subs-sectors and the types of work performed, existing studies have identified some common themes in the conditions of work experienced by employees.

As far as the captives and third-parties are concerned, the nature of work stems from the place that India has come to occupy in the global servicing chain. Accordingly, it has been demonstrated that work organisation in Indian call centres largely approximates, and indeed may well constitute, an exaggerated form of the mass production model (Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Batt et al, 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2005: 269). As indicated above, recent evidence (Taylor and Bain, 2006b: 46-71) strongly suggests that the BPO industry as a whole, whether captive or third-party, call-centre or non-customer facing, still tends to deliver largely standardised and routinised services of lower complexity, despite limited moves up the value chain to KPO.

As a consequence, tight monitoring, surveillance and a plethora of quantitative and qualitative controls are implemented (Datta, 2004; d’Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Ramesh, 2004a;b; Taylor and Bain, 2005) which minimise employee discretion. For example, Batt et al (2005) reported 71% of managers saying their employees had little or no discretion over daily tasks and 76% little or no discretion over work procedures. Workers’ interviews prior to this study have revealed complaints of infrequent breaks and, on voice services, the compulsion to remain engaged on calls for long periods.

Although the ‘cyber coolie’ metaphor (Ramesh, 2004) may be overdrawn, many voice and non-voice agents do report that they experience their work as pressurised and frequently stressful and contributing to ‘exit’ and burnout. Of course, it is not being argued here that the experience of highly-pressurised working conditions leads automatically to a propensity to organise or identify with trade unions. As d’Cruz and Noronha (2006) remind us, BPO professionals imbued with a strong sense of serving customers may well internalise these pressures. Nevertheless, these workplace experiences provide an inescapable quotidian (or nocturnal) reality.

There is evidence, though, that many employees in recent times have experienced an intensification of work. The root causes of this growing pressure are sharpened competition in the outsourcing market, affecting both captives and third-parties, rising costs in India and reducing margins. Nasscom-McKinsey (2005: 126) make this explicit when they indicate how ‘falling billing rates and the rising costs of operations are squeezing margins’, compelling companies ‘to explore productivity improvements and value through innovation’. 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’.

Improvements in productivity include various forms of re-engineering. Enhanced utilisation refers to optimising the use of workstations/equipment and labour. This can involve, in call centre services for example, extending the hours of operation through serving in sequence differing geographical markets in successive time zones, so that occupancy rates can be maximised. As ever in call centres, but applying also to back-office processes, increased efficiencies in the utilisation of labour can be generated

through technological innovation and adaptation (e.g. forms of CTI [computer telephony integration] such as IVR [interactive voice response]) (Miozzo and Ramirez, 2003) and through improvements in call cycle times, which become manifest through tightened numerical or volume targets (see Bain et al, 2002; Taylor et al, 2005). The outcome can be dramatic, particularly in the context of volume growth in business. Nasscom provides the hypothetical example of a firm

...growing at 30 per cent per annum, [where] an annual variance of 2 per cent in utilisation levels can lead to a variance of over 10 per cent in the total cost index for a firm (2006: 182).

The BPO industry has thus adopted 'operational excellence' agendas, to use the parlance of the Indian industry. The pressure on the cost base, particularly from rising labour costs, is set to continue, and is likely to prove more significant in its impact than the combined counter-effect of all the cost reduction measures, and the anticipated further decline in telecom costs. The outcome will continue to be increasing pressure on workers; longer shifts, shorter and fewer breaks and tighter targets.

The recent appreciation in the rupee's value against the dollar, which has impacted rapidly on revenues and margins, may contribute further and significantly to work intensification. Outgoing Nasscom Chairman Kiran Karnik recently stated that, 'The BPO industry will be strongly hit' and the solution lies in improvements in 'operational efficiency', essentially a euphemism for productivity improvements (<http://news.oneindia.in/2007/10/03/bpo-mid-size-companies-to-be-strongly-hit-by-re-impact-1191409685.html>). It has been reported that some companies are seriously considering extending employees' working hours each day, making Saturday a working day, increasing productivity and lowering salary increments (*Times of India*, 23 July 2007)

As has been widely documented, distinctive characteristics of the Indian BPO industry exacerbate pressures: nocturnal call-handling for overseas customers, long commuting times, extended shifts, unpaid overtime ('extra time'). In existing literature, agents have confirmed the prevalence of symptoms of work-related ill-health and disruptions to work-life balance and family life, which may impact most on women employees.

There are the complex issues of identity construction, as Indians navigate the tensions between their culture and the requirements of service provision for western customers, including practices such as locational masking, adopting pseudonyms and accent neutralisation, and which may result in racist abuse. These issues have preoccupied many researchers (d'Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Mirchandani, 2004a,b; McMilan, 2006; Poster, 2007). While further study is required to relate employees' psychological responses to the potential for collective organisation, it cannot be assumed that agents are simply more intensely exploited units of capital, but rather are active, social, economic and cultural participants who, in constructing their own meanings of work, may develop forms of 'objection' or 'resistance' rather than 'assimilation' or 'accommodation' (Poster, 2007).

Researchers have also identified a 'democratic deficit' in Indian BPO. There is evidence that customary Indian hierarchical cultures have been transposed to BPO, and not merely to its third-party and domestic segments (Taylor and Bain, 2006a). 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, 2005b).

Top-down methods dominate staff communications systems (Nasscom, 2003) and employee involvement practices are task-based, geared to increasing productivity and quality, and not intended to give employees a voice, let alone any real participation in decision-making. Batt et al (2005: 17) record that only 7% of employees in international call centres are part of problem-solving groups. Segueing into a more focused discussion of what we know already about trade unionism in Indian BPO, we noted above (Section 1.2) that many UK companies that have migrated work to India do recognise trade unions in the UK but have not extended this representation to their Indian operations (Bain and Taylor, 2008). This failure does underscore the democratic deficit in workplace governance in India.

Finally, from the employees' perspective there is the important issue of pay and rewards. It should be noted that pay and rewards are distributed unevenly across the 'sector'. In general, surveys such as the 'Nasscom-Hewitt Total Rewards Study' indicate that levels of remuneration tend to be higher for back-office employees than for voice-based agents (Nasscom, 2007b: 148) but, more significantly, captives and MNCs (multinational corporations) tend to pay more than Indian third-party providers and both considerably more than domestic outsourcers.

5. Sources and Methods

The initiative for this project was taken by members of the research team. Although the team was granted access and full co-operation by UNITES, it was agreed from the outset that the research undertaken would be wholly independent of that organisation. The sources of this funding reflect this academic independence; the University of Strathclyde New Professors fund, the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland and the Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad.

5.1 Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed exclusively for the present research as there has been no previous attempt to survey BPO professionals in India specifically about emerging union representation. In addition to developing new questions for surveying this workforce, we also drew on existing surveys of trade union members and/or call centre workers in the UK. Piloting the questionnaire took place in February 2007 in the form of face-to-face interviews in Chennai, carried out by the research team. Qualitative feedback generated several refinements.

The questionnaire structure was designed around the research aims as follows: demographic and work profile, reasons for joining UNITES, working conditions that might prompt workers to join UNITES, the extent to which workers experience pressure and the factors causing that pressure, work/non-work relationships and work-life balance, perceptions of management effectiveness, attitudes to management in general, the role of HR and whether it acts as substitute for independent employee representation, and obstacles to increasing UNITES membership. A detailed elaboration of these items can be found in Appendix 1.

5.2 Questionnaire distribution

The distribution strategy aimed to capture as many of UNITES' members as possible working in Indian domestic, third party, and captive operations across key geographical locations from April to July 2007. Using UNITES' membership databases, independent social science graduates under the direction of the Indian researchers were employed to approach members and complete the questionnaires as structured interviews.

This strategy provided a total of 1,206 completed questionnaires from the following locations; Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, Kochi, Mumbai, and Delhi NCR. However, 13 per cent of respondents claimed not to be members of UNITES. This was because some of the questionnaire completion occurred during UNITES' meetings when non-members were present. In order to deliver consistency, non-members were excluded from the analysis leaving a total of 879 completed questionnaires.

5.3 Employee interviews

Supplementary semi-structured interviews with members and officers were conducted to allow expansion on the questionnaire findings. The interview schedule followed the questionnaire structure, while allowing room for exploring further UNITES members'

experiences. These were carried out by the research team in four locations – Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Bangalore. A cross-section of members was chosen across genders and company type to produce a total of 45 interviews lasting approximately one hour each. All interviews were voluntary and were both taped and transcribed.

6. Research Findings

6.1 Profile of respondents

The majority of UNITES members responding (70%) was based in Indian domestic companies with 22% in captives and 8% in Indian third-parties. The even gender balance reflects what we know about the industry (Batt et al, 2005; callcentres.net, 2003: 33; Taylor and Bain, 2003; 2006a). Positively, this suggests that UNITES 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 BPO workforce. Batt et al (2005: 9) found 99% of international call centre agents to be full-time.

More outstanding are the statistics on working hours. The mean of 216 hours per month (54 hours per week) demonstrates the prevalence in Indian BPO of a long hours culture, most pronounced in captives and domestic centres. Comments made by respondents repeatedly referred to the long hours of work, comprising both contracted and scheduled hours, and quite extensive overtime working. Average tenure was 1½ years, although this was lower in domestic companies at just over one year.

The evidence on career orientation provides fascinating insight into the intentions of this cohort of employees. Overall, only one-in-four believed that their current job was one that they would stay in or was part of their career advancement. A majority in domestics (52%) believed that their current job was part of a career that would take them to other BPO companies, compared to 30% in captives and 22% in third-parties. Interview data reinforces the supposition that members in domestics, in common with their non-unionised colleagues, perceive a job in that sub-sector as a stepping-stone to employment in the better paying and higher status international-facing companies.

Evidently, there are multiple and diverse career motives amongst UNITES members. While a willingness to move employer in order to better oneself was reported, a number of interviewees expressed their desire to build a career in their 'dream job'. A call centre worker in a Bangalore-based captive effectively expressed the duality of his colleagues' orientations.

Every second company is willing to pay you very well irrespective of your experience. If the things don't work out well in one company they don't care, they can go elsewhere. Having said that there are lots of people who really don't like doing this. Security of job is also important for them. It is a kind of mixture at times.

In other words, it appears that although many UNITES members do see that moving their workplace and their employer is a way to improve pay and conditions, equally many do express the wish to stay with their current employer in order to develop a career.

Around 70% of respondents in domestic companies and third-parties were engaged purely in call centre work. In captives, however, 67% combined call centre with other business process work. Over 70% overall reported primarily receiving inbound sales,

technical or general customer service calls rather than being engaged in outbound telesales.

Table 2: Sample characteristics

	Captive (N=192)		Indian 3 rd party (N=69)		Domestic (N=618)		Total (N=879)	
	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
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%
Career intentions								
A long-term job I will stay in	72	39%	26	41%	109	18%	207	24%
Career advancement in this company	46	25%	19	30%	157	26%	222	25%
Part of career that will take me to different BPO companies	54	30%	14	22%	318	52%	386	44%
Part of career that will probably take me outside BPO	19	10%	5	8%	16	3%	40	5%
Not part of a career/uncertain	13	7%	11	18%	30	5%	54	6%
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%
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>
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 hours ^a	95	206	48	191	520	219	663	216

Note.^a Based on a restricted sample range (79%) who provided calculable responses.

6.2 Finding out about and joining UNITES

The youth of the workforce and the fact that almost all were graduates means, by definition, that very few respondents had been members of a union before joining UNITES. Encouragingly, the overwhelming majority found the process of joining easy. Only 11% overall reported any difficulties that were largely attributed to lack of awareness of UNITES' existence or of direct contact with the organisation. Those who found joining easy cited (a) their colleagues or team leaders as already being members and introducing them to UNITES, (b) ease of access to the web portal allowing them to join on-line through a simple procedure, and (c) the low joining fee.

Table 3: Finding out about and joining UNITES

	Captive		Indian 3 rd party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
How did you find out about UNITES?								
Colleague/friend at work	151	79%	43	63%	451	73%	645	74%
UNITES website	10	5%	13	19%	211	34%	234	27%
Friend/relative who works in different CC/BPO	52	27%	31	45%	73	12%	156	18%
UNITES leaflet	2	1%	5	7%	51	8%	58	8%
How did you join UNITES?								
A 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 my 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 a form to the UNITES office	13	7%	9	13%	21	3%	43	3%
I joined at a UNITES meeting	13	7%	8	12%	13	2%	34	1%
I joined when asked by UNITES officer not in my workplace	1	1%	3	4%	4	1%	8	1%

Members' initial awareness of UNITES came primarily from friends or relatives, either those in the same workplace or those working in different BPOs. Here there was some difference between recent and older members, with recent recruits more likely to report colleagues in the workplace, and older members, friends/relatives working in other call centres. This might well be seen to be an expected finding given that UNITES is an organising initiative 'starting from scratch'. By definition, the original members were likely to have heard about UNITES through social or family connections. For example, a Chennai call centre worker reported that her knowledge of UNITES came from her father who was a unionised employee of BSNL (Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited), the national telecom provider. However, members who had become established in the workplace, on the condition that they were prepared to make their fellow workers aware of their affiliation, were likely to become the most important source of information and recruitment.

Next in terms of importance as sources of information were the UNITES website, friends/relatives outside of the workplace, and then a UNITES leaflet. Other sources, such as newspaper advertisements or articles, emails, radio/television programmes, or specific campaigns were cited by mere handfuls of respondents.

These findings about members' initial awareness of UNITES resonate with the responses given about the actual process by which they joined the organisation. As can be seen, 80% overall stated that they had been signed up by a UNITES member in their workplace. Making due allowance for the differing national contexts between the UK and India, the findings confirm what appears to be a key fact of union growth in UK call centres, where the key role of workplace representatives as recruiters stands out (Heery et al, 2000; Bain and Taylor, 2002).

Of course, in Indian BPO, there is no system of workplace reps (representatives) but one can suggest on the basis of the evidence that embryonic leaders have emerged who play a similar role. Two of the most significant examples come from a captive in Bangalore and a third party company in Noida, where members have recruited clusters of members through face-to-face discussion, persuasion and a willingness to pursue members' grievances. What is key to recruitment, then, is the presence of supportive members and colleagues at workplace level. It is therefore mistaken to claim, as several opponents of trade unions have, that UNITES and the collective organisation of employees is somehow an alien import in the Indian BPO industry. Where recruitment has occurred, it appears to have done so largely on the basis of organic developments in the workplace. Some members understood that organic growth at workplace level would also be central to the union increasing its membership base.

Consistent with the importance both of workplace-based issues and personal contacts, it seems also that forms of remote contact and individuals taking the initiative to join (joining on-line, sending a form to the office) are much less important.

When asked what UNITES could do to improve recruitment a higher profile and greater media coverage was mentioned by some, and interviewees provide insights to this request. Several mentioned how successful UNITES has been when it gained publicity through the high-profile Prathiba and BelAir cases. Several members stated that when issues of employees' concern arose in the BPO industry, one of the important responsibilities that UNITES has is to ensure that they are well-publicised.

UNITES has to unite really and march ahead. Take serious steps and move fast...The faster you move, the faster the processes are going to be. This means you start your media campaign, your one-to-one campaign, so they start getting educated, knowing. [What needs to be said to employees is] if you have any problems in your call centre, please log onto our website or phone this number (Call centre agent, captive centre, Hyderabad).

6.3 Reasons for joining UNITES

It is clear that employees have joined, and are continuing to join UNITES, not for one reason alone but for combinations of reasons. Table 4 ranks the reasons given by members according to the frequency of responses. The most frequently cited reasons were primarily instrumental. In particular, 75% overall said that one of the reasons they had joined was that UNITES would help them improve pay and conditions. Of course, for those members in companies where collective agreements exist, joining might be directly related to UNITES' ability to improve pay and conditions. In those domestic operations where collective bargaining exists, it makes intuitive sense to join the organisation which negotiates on behalf of employees.

However, even in circumstances where there is no collective bargaining, it is striking how many respondents (81% in captives and 40% in third-parties) reported that UNITES' ability to improve pay and conditions was a reason for joining. It is necessary to put forward explanations other than UNITES' current ability to influence pay and conditions collectively. Interview evidence provides some interesting data.

Firstly, there are several instances where UNITES had intervened on behalf of employees over pay-related grievances. These include cases where employees had experienced the withholding of pay or bonuses legitimately earned, and the quite widespread practice of employees being compelled to work overtime without receiving remuneration. In additional instances, employees reported that they had received lower salaries than what they had been promised on recruitment. In sum, then, UNITES' perceived ability to represent individuals with grievances over pay and conditions had exerted some influence over decisions to join.

Secondly, a number of those interviewed expressed the view that, while UNITES would not be able to act to improve pay and conditions in the short-term, its potential future ability to do so had influenced their decision to join.

Table 4. Reasons for joining UNITES

	Captive		Indian 3 rd party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Improve my pay and conditions	155	81%	27	40%	472	77%	654	75%
Information/advice about my rights	133	69%	25	37%	407	66%	565	65%
I believe in trade unions	119	62%	16	24%	195	32%	330	38%
Help my career	96	50%	18	27%	205	33%	319	37%
Other people at work are members	102	53%	35	52%	149	24%	286	33%
UNITES will help me find out about pay/conditions in other workplaces	129	67%	21	31%	133	22%	283	32%
In UNITES I found people with the same attitudes	107	56%	28	42%	131	21%	266	30%
UNITES provides training to enhance my skills and knowledge	100	52%	19	28%	135	22%	254	29%
BPO professionals should have their own independent organization to represent their interests	101	53%	28	42%	111	18%	240	27%
UNITES gave me support with a problem at work	109	57%	39	58%	68	11%	216	25%
UNITES' community activities	134	70%	16	24%	52	8%	202	23%
I wanted to help improve conditions in the industry	95	49%	18	27%	83	13%	196	22%
UNITES campaigns to improve conditions in BPO	101	53%	25	37%	62	10%	188	22%
UNITES provides housing/welfare information	100	52%	19	28%	42	7%	161	19%
UNITES provides good social activities	93	48%	14	21%	24	4%	131	15%

Next in terms of importance as a reason for joining was UNITES' ability to provide information or advice about rights. More than two-thirds of members in captives (69%) and almost two-thirds in domestics (65%) cited this. Interviewees provided insight into the fundamental importance that many attached to issues of rights and representation.

I think it [UNITES] is very useful for people who are trying to enter the BPO industry...when they have nowhere to go and they feel they do not have that voice to speak up, and when they feel that there is a lot of prejudice and...so many problems. (BPO agent, captive, Bangalore)

In the early days there was nowhere for an employee to go in terms of whatever issues – claims, insurance – they might have. Here UNITES is calling people and saying if there is a problem [with your rights] we will represent and help you. (Voice agent, domestic Bangalore)

Even amongst members working in third-party centres, a significant minority (37%) reported that joining UNITES was stimulated by the perception that UNITES provides valuable information and advice on employment rights. In responses to open questions asking members to expand on the reasons why they joined UNITES the most common theme to emerge was the question of rights (e.g. ‘For more rights’, ‘Obtain more rights’, ‘For more concrete rights’).

More than 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 (29% overall) reported the importance of UNITES providing training that would enhance ‘skills and knowledge’. For members in captives particularly (67%), joining UNITES enabled them to access information on pay and conditions across BPO. Clearly, these findings resonate with arguments stressing the importance of BPO employees’ professionalism, aspirant careerism and horizontal mobility. Again UNITES was not seen as a body alien to the industry, but for many was seen as playing a positive role in pursuing members’ individualistic ambitions.

Nevertheless, the data does provide evidence of a more explicit trade union orientation. More than one-in-three (38%) stated that they had joined UNITES because they believed in trade unions. That ideological reasons have influenced so many to join is perhaps remarkable given the supposed universal antipathy to trade unionism as depicted in the official industry view. This is not to deny that this pro-union conviction is held by a minority of UNITES members, who themselves comprise only a fraction of the BPO workforce as a whole. Nevertheless, this finding alone raise doubts over the categorical claim of commentators that trade unions would be unable to establish any sort of presence in Indian BPO. Take for example, the assertions of Sandhu (2006) in his article, entitled ‘Why unions fail in organising India’s BPO-ITES industry’.

Call centre employees do not want to be part of trade unions because they associate the latter with ‘blue-collar workers’ and not with their perceived upward mobility. Also, their work schedules and the highly modernised self-contained work islands they inhabit encourage them to think of unions as unnecessary (2006: 4319).

To repeat, of course it is only a minority of a minority who are expressing this pro-union sentiment, but the perspectives of Sandu and others would lead us to believe that employees universally have rejected unions, which this evidence certainly calls into question. Remarkably as many as 62% in captives stated that one reason for joining UNITES was that they believed in trade unions, although this was less pronounced amongst members in third-parties and domestics. Complementing this attitudinal finding is the fact that a majority in captives and slightly less than a majority in third-party BPO operations believed that 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’. This reinforces the conclusion that, to the extent that UNITES has achieved success in recruiting members, it has been largely as the organic outcome of the collective experience of work and the influence of peers.

Consistent with these findings are the fact that relatively large numbers of members in captives (56%) and third-party centres (42%) said that joining was influenced by the fact that they had found in UNITES people with the same attitudes. Clearly for many of these, ‘the same attitudes’ included a shared recognition of the importance of BPO professionals having their own independent organisation to represent their own interests. A majority of members in captives (53%) and 42% in third-party centres stated that this had been a reason why they had joined UNITES.

It is interesting too that 57% of respondents in captives and 58% in third-party centres state that the reason why they joined was because UNITES had given them support with a problem at work. These are sizable proportions and suggest that many face problems that have required them to have sought support from UNITES, or to have been represented by UNITES in an attempt to have had these problems resolved. The most frequent answer given to the open question asking respondents to identify the three things that UNITES had been most successful at, was its role as problem solver.

Complementing these findings are the responses of employees in relation to perceptions of UNITES’ role in improving conditions generally in BPO. Fifty-three per cent of respondents in captives and 37% in third-parties said they had joined UNITES because of the organisation’s campaigns to improve conditions in BPO. In this regard, a number of members interviewed stated that they had joined UNITES as they were stimulated by a general desire to improve conditions in this industry. As far as the interviews indicate some of the keenest and most active members of UNITES are those who are motivated by a concern for the welfare of their fellow workers, by a sense of justice and a desire to improve conditions in the industry generally.

It is not like people say that unions mean [that] there is some negative feeling. So here we are trying to make it very positive for employer and employees. That is how I got into UNITES. Since I was in a call centre, I could know what the internal problems are and how we can help the BPO industry grow better. That is the whole idea of me getting into UNITES. (Bangalore, third party call centre agent)

I feel really good to be part of a union. It is challenging, caring for the people who work hard and making the industry better for all. (Hyderabad, captive, call centre agent)

Less important overall as reasons for joining were UNITES’ community activities, its provision of housing/welfare information and provision of good social activities. Nevertheless, for those in captives, all of these reasons were relatively more important.

In conclusion, in answers to open questions on the reasons for joining respondents emphasised the importance of having unity amongst employees, the need for employees to have a voice, ‘safety’, ‘security’, ‘protection’, and the fact that UNITES

provides the opportunity 'to get problems solved'. Some of the specific comments are quite illuminating such as the following by a call centre agent working for a captive,

Because they [UNITES] help the members and others. When they face any troubles, they take it as their own problem and solve it very quickly.

It is interesting that a number of members were keen to mention the role that UNITES has played in solving problems 'peacefully'. This is an important point, for it contradicts the assumption held by many employers that a trade union in BPO necessarily means the adoption of an adversarial stance. On the contrary, it is the constructive, problem-solving approach of UNITES that has contributed to attracting members

6.4 Working conditions prompting colleagues to join UNITES

The findings presented in Table 5 below 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% 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% as very important.

Following 'working times' in terms of overall importance were concerns over the security of employees which remain prominent despite claimed improvements in companies' practices following Prathibha Murthy's murder. In fact, UNITES has led other campaigns in Delhi and in Bangalore following road 'accidents' involving 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% 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 BPO industry might be potentially vulnerable to competition from other low-cost geographies or to decisions by companies in the 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 downsizing or closures. A member from a Bangalore domestic reported,

...certain employees could not do anything except succumbing to the managerial discretion. They have nobody to fall back to rather in the sense somebody they could look for some help and support...once in a while where there are people who seem to be targeted, who absolutely have no rights whatever of any kind. Because they are helpless, they are victimised or probably they have to succumb to the entire thing. Eventually they leave sacrificing the salary...

In this sense, members are reporting on their colleagues' individual sense of insecurity.

Pay was seen by almost one-in-two of members overall (46%) 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 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.

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). Around one-in-two of members believed that the targets would be an issue prompting their colleagues to join. Interview evidence provides innumerable illustrations of these essential characteristics of Indian BPO/call centre work. We have the space only to cite some of the more graphic examples.

In XXX daily targets are given because it is a typical call centre. Obviously the call centre is a target concept. At a stretch, a technician is supposed to take at least 50-60 calls, that is typically a Herculean task. Time is money. But there should be something called time for relaxation. Huge call volumes. People are stopped from going for their breaks or their breaks are postponed to a large extent, their brain stops working and they start shouting at customers. Once they find that the person has shouted at the customer, he is thrown out of the job. But they don't address what is the problem or the reason for that action. (Voice agent, Chennai captive)

In XXX we do 20 calls a day and if we do less they send a mail report saying so many calls were to be taken and you have missed so much. If the AHT is above it will be shown in red and if you are within target it will show in green. It is so demotivating. (Voice agent, Hyderabad captive)

Supervisory pressure was also seen as a reason why colleagues might join.

No time to freshen up. I will be looking for the first break. We were not given paper cups. We were not allowed to get it inside also. So no water, three hours continuous talking, without taking a glass of water. We were supposed to be happy with the lunch-break, run, drink water, have lunch, come running back

because 30 minutes is over. As the three teams will be having their break, there is hardly any place in the rest-room to rest. You will log-in late at least by 2-3 minutes and you will have red marks. The leader will yell, come to each and every person and scream. (Chennai domestic)

The team leader (TL) should be an example and that has not happened... There is a TL in IBM who used to scream for every small thing at the top of her voice. (Chennai captive).

We should comment also on members' perceptions regarding health and safety. While 45% overall thought that issues relating to health and safety would prompt colleagues to join, as many as 63% in captive centres and 48% 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.

Table 5: Work conditions prompting employees to join UNITES (% 'very important')

	Captive		Indian 3 rd 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%

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% of members in domestic centres reported that this was an important factor that might prompt non-members to join, this percentage doubled (26%) for members in captives and rose to one-in-three (34%) 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%) were more likely to see this as a very important reason leading non-members to join as compared to those in domestic centres (60%) and third party centres (35%). In sum, the evidence from members is that there is a broader constituency for UNITES amongst work colleagues throughout the BPO industry, although this may be most pronounced in captive centres.

6.5 Degree of pressure felt on a normal working day

The survey included a general question asking members to report on the degree of pressure they experience on a normal day. The results are in Table 6.

Table 6: Degree of pressure felt on a normal working day (% quite/very pressurised')

	Captive		Indian 3rd 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%

In overall terms, two-thirds of respondents reported that they were either 'very' or 'quite pressurised' as a result of their work on a normal day. Nevertheless, there were notable differences according to sub-sector, gender and nature of calls as far as voice agents were concerned. Firstly, it can be seen that respondents in the domestic segment were more likely to report being pressurised. No fewer than 77% stated that they felt 'very' or 'quite pressurised' on a normal day. This compares to 44% in captives and 31% 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.

6.6 Aspects of work which contribute to pressure of work

In an attempt to identify the sources of the pressure experienced by BPO employees, we asked respondents to indicate the extent to which aspects of work contributed to

that pressure. Respondents were given a list of 28 items and asked to respond on a four-point scale. In Table 7, we rank these items according to the frequency with which members reported either ‘a great deal’ or ‘to some extent’.

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%) and domestic centres (89%). This finding confirms what we know already about call centre environments in developed countries (the UK specifically) and in India.

First, in a series of studies, conducted in UK financial services (Taylor and Bain, 2001), across several sectors (Bain et al, 2002; Taylor et al, 2002) and in utilities (Taylor et al, 2003), agents overwhelmingly reported targets to be the principal source of pressure. Second, in the Indian context, as indicated above (Section 4) the existing literature suggests strongly that tight monitoring and both quantitative and qualitative targets are imposed through the strict application of SLAs (Service Level Agreements).

Part of the reason for this stringent implementation is the desire by clients and host organisations to ensure that the services provided remotely from India meet the required cost and quality criteria (Batt et al, 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2005; 2006b). Thus, the generic adoption of targets receives a spatially specific twist in the Indian context.

Scanning the table, we can see that some of the other distinctive aspects of work organisation in call centres have been perceived by the respondents as important sources of pressure. Notable in this respect is the large percentages reporting numbers of calls queuing or waiting. Indeed, this source of pressure is reported as particularly acute in the Indian third party sub-sector (98%) and captives (90%).

Other call centre specific sources of pressure – such as 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. All of these 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.

Table 7: Aspects of work which contribute to pressure of work ('A great deal' and 'To some extent' combined %)

	Captive		Indian 3rd 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%

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. Long commuting times, as much as long distances, have been identified as a major problem. Deb (2004) reported his, and his fellow workers' experiences of inhabiting 'a self-contained world of 13-hour day, taking into account the travelling times of up to two hours each day, with space for little else to penetrate one's existence'. These are related both to the overstrained infrastructure in the major 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.

Working evening or night shifts was also seen as a major source of pressure. Perhaps surprisingly this was experienced to the same degree across the different sub-sectors of the industry. Around two-thirds of respondents in captives, third-party and domestic centres stated that either night-time or evening working contributed either a great deal or to some extent to the pressures of the job.

Supervisory pressure was identified by relatively large numbers as a source of pressure. Again, more in captives and third parties (69%) than in domestic centres (52%) reported that this contributed either a great deal or to some extent. Specific mention too must be made of inadequate staffing levels. On the basis of the responses given, it would appear that this is a much greater source of pressure in third party (66%) and captive (63%) centres than in domestic operations. As a consequence, it appears that the 'lean' model is applied to a greater extent in international facing operations.

Finally, it appears that conformance with linguistic protocols is a source of greater pressure in both captives and third parties than in domestic centres. For example, 'making sure my accent is acceptable' was reported as contributing to pressure of work by 64% in third parties and 40% in captives as opposed to 29% 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% in Indian third parties, and 44% in captives, reported this as contributing to the pressure of work compared to a mere 15% 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.

6.7 Work/non-work relationship and work-life balance

Questions directed at the work-life boundary (Table 8) revealed that such tensions were felt much more by those in captive and Indian third party companies than in domestics. While in the former two, almost none of the respondents reported never experiencing these issues, in domestic operations, one third responded that work never interfered with their social life or the time they are able to spend with family and friends. It is almost certain that the cause of this is the particular patterns of working associated with work directed at overseas markets in combination with aspects of work organisation identified in the previous section. The detailed answers

presented underscore the particular pressures faced by many employees – specifically voice agents - in operations providing services for overseas clients and customers, either in captive or third-party centres. The contrast between the experiences of respondents in domestic and internationally-facing centres is quite striking. In all respects, members in captive and third-party centres reported a far greater intensity of pressure at the work/non-work interface. For example, while 30% of members in domestics reported that they felt exhausted after work ‘all the time’ or ‘quite often’, 74% in third-party centres and 84% in captive centres did so. While less than one-third of members in domestic centres stated that their sleep was disrupted by work concerns, the proportions rose to 62% for those in captives and 81% for those in Indian third-parties.

Table 8: Work/non-work relationship (‘all of the time’ and quite often’ combined %)

	Captive		Indian 3rd party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
It is hard to get time off to take care of family/personal matters	136	73%	43	62%	242	39%	421	48%
My job prevents me from spending enough time with family/partner	132	71%	51	74%	221	36%	404	47%
I feel exhausted after work	158	84%	51	74%	186	30%	395	45%
Poor shift patterns adversely affect my social life	116	63%	49	72%	197	32%	362	42%
My sleep is disrupted by work concerns	116	62%	56	81%	173	28%	345	40%
My work keeps me from spending enough time with friends	129	71%	45	66%	156	25%	330	38%

The interviews afforded vivid evidence of the intensity with which life-work pressures were experienced by employees. The following observation made by a manager working at a captive centre based in Hyderabad of the conditions facing his colleagues is particularly telling.

...the chemistry of a human being is different in the day time and the night time. So when a BPO employee walks out of the door in the morning, what does he have in mind? He induces sleep, it does not come automatically. What one can do least is to darken the room, see that your family members do not disturb you, no noise in there – cut off the door bell. How many days can you do this? Next what does a man do when he does not get sleep in the night? He has two pegs of drink. So consider seven in the morning as nine or ten at night and have two drinks. Little more advanced is sleeping pills. So when a BPO person comes out, he has all these in some form or the other.

6.8 Perceptions of management effectiveness

As mentioned in the introduction, the received wisdom is that workforce management is conducted effectively. To the limited extent that problems do arise they are solved readily. This optimistic scenario implies that managers involve their skilled human resources in a shared undertaking with ‘positive sum’ outcomes. Nevertheless, as was trailed in Section 4, more critical voices (Batt et al, 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2006a) have gestured towards an alternative reality where communication and involvement mechanisms have been limited in scope and depth. The findings in Table 9 provide insight into these important questions facing the industry and its workforce.

Table 9: Effectiveness of management (% answering ‘very’ or ‘quite unsuccessful’)

	Captive		Indian 3rd party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Listening to my ideas how the service can be improved	104	55%	18	27%	503	83%	625	73%
Preventing work pressure from becoming excessive	113	61%	14	23%	473	78%	600	71%
Understanding the pressures of the job	96	53%	16	26%	485	82%	597	71%
Managing the volume of calls	104	57%	12	21%	479	79%	595	71%
Providing me with career progression	98	54%	16	25%	480	80%	594	70%
Varying the tasks I do	94	51%	14	22%	480	79%	588	69%
Involving me in target setting	108	59%	14	23%	443	75%	565	68%
Being sensitive-family/personal responsibilities	117	64%	14	25%	434	72%	565	67%
Involving me in decisions that affect me	101	54%	19	29%	442	73%	562	65%
Fair allocation of tasks	99	53%	10	16%	441	73%	550	64%
Providing sufficient training and development	92	49%	16	25%	427	70%	535	62%
Fair treatment of the workforce	80	43%	12	19%	425	70%	517	60%
Monitoring my calls fairly	85	47%	11	19%	401	66%	497	59%
Giving me feedback on caller satisfaction	91	51%	13	23%	378	63%	482	58%
Making the workplace a fun place	115	61%	18	28%	369	61%	502	58%
Developing effective teamwork	89	49%	15	23%	365	60%	469	55%
Giving me the information I need	87	46%	16	25%	364	60%	467	54%
Making the job interesting	96	51%	11	16%	340	55%	447	51%

The responses to the 18 items have been presented in decreasing order according to lack of perceived success. For each item the 'very unsuccessful'¹ and 'quite unsuccessful' responses have been combined. As can be seen, there was strong overall dissatisfaction with management in all these areas.

The first category may be considered to pertain to the general areas of employee involvement and communication. In this respect, management was seen to be most unsuccessful (73%) in listening to employees' ideas about how the service could be improved. Slightly fewer overall thought that management was either very or quite unsuccessful (68%) in involving respondents in target setting and then slightly fewer still in involving them generally in decisions that affect them. Majorities perceived management as being either very or quite unsuccessful in relation to giving feedback on caller satisfaction (58%), developing effective teamwork (55%) and giving employees the information they needed to do the job (51%).

A second category encompasses management's ability to protect employees from the pressures arising from task performance. Seventy-one per cent perceived management as unsuccessful in preventing work pressures from becoming excessive, in understanding the pressures of the job and in managing call volumes. We might include in this category the 67% who believed that management was unsuccessful in being sensitive to family or personal responsibilities.

A third category relates to management's effectiveness over career and development matters. Seventy per cent perceived management to be very or quite unsuccessful in providing career progression and 62% overall in providing sufficient training and development.

A fourth category of items might be seen to relate to making the job and workplace interesting. More than two-thirds overall (69%) and a majority (51%) perceived management to be either very or quite unsuccessful in respectively varying tasks and making the job interesting. One associated and compelling finding in the context of the employers much vaunted portrayal of the industry as a fun environment for young employees is that 58% believed that management was unsuccessful 'in making the workplace a fun place'.

A final category composed of two items concerns issues of fairness. Almost two-thirds (64%) stated that they perceived management as being either very or quite unsuccessful in terms of fair allocation of tasks. More specifically as far as voice work is concerned, 59% reported that management was unsuccessful in monitoring calls fairly.

There were statistically significant differences between the three types of company in all cases. Indian domestic operators consistently received the lowest ratings of success from the three, and were closely followed by captives. Third party operators consistently received the highest ratings of success from respondents.

¹ A consistent 10% of respondents overall in all areas believed management to be very unsuccessful.

Controlling for gender and tenure with the company, it was found that women tended to be more positive about management overall, but only in the case of perceptions of their involvement in decision making and in the provision of sufficient training and development were any gender differences significant over and above the effects of tenure. Tenure was statistically significant in all cases, with the longer serving respondents more positive about the success of management.

In sum, significant levels of dissatisfaction were found amongst survey respondents in relation to all the items in both domestic and captive centres. Such findings call into question the image of managerial success as promoted by companies and by industry bodies generally. Of course, as with other findings in this study it might be conceded that the survey covers employees who may already have accumulated dissatisfactions which have contributed to their decisions to join UNITES.

Nevertheless, the more salient observation is the fact these dissatisfactions and perceptions of management ineffectiveness actually exist in the first place even though the survey is only reporting on a minority of employees. The point of this discussion is not to portray management in a wholly negative light but that, positively, the findings in this table may suggest ways in which management might improve its practice by incorporating employees more effectively in consultation and decision making over a range of issues.

6.9 Attitudes to management in general

While in section 6.8 and Table 9 we examined employee perceptions of management effectiveness in respect of concrete aspects of the management function, this section explores attitudes towards management in general. The evidence is structured around the extent of agreement or disagreement with four statements. We have combined the responses of those who strongly agreed or agreed with these statements.

Table 10: General attitudes to management (% answering ‘agree/strongly agree’)

	Captive		Indian 3rd party		Domestic		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Management								
Management are only interested in statistics and efficiency.	184	96%	60	88%	606	98%	850	97%
Employees like me are not treated with the respect they deserve.	144	76%	57	84%	475	77%	676	78%
Management and employees have common aims.	73	39%	47	73%	124	20%	244	28%
Management has the welfare of their employees at heart.	78	42%	48	72%	111	18%	237	28%

Notes. Statements were rated on a four point scale: 1 ‘disagree strongly’ 2 ‘disagree’ 3 ‘agree’ 4 ‘agree strongly’.

Respondents’ general attitudes to management reflected little in the way of common aims and values, and an overall belief that management are interested mainly in

maximising efficiency. As can be seen, there was near unanimous agreement by respondents in all the industry segments with the statement that management are only interested in statistics and efficiency. This finding emphasises the quantitative-driven metrics-focused work design. There were only minor differences in responses to the statement 'employees like me are not treated with the respect that they deserve'. As many as 84% in third parties, 77% in domestics and 76% in captives strongly agreed or agreed with the statement.

Other items show a more uneven pattern of response. In terms of the overall results, only 28% agreed with the statement 'management and employees have common aims'. Of course, this is a significant finding for it suggests an attitudinal pluralism that conflicts with the depiction of the industry as dominated by unitarist attitudes. While this perception that employees have different interests from those of their employers is certainly true of those respondents working in domestic centres (only 20% agreed with the statement) and, to a lesser extent, of those in captives (39% agreement), it does not apply to those working in third-parties. In this segment, 73% disagreed with this statement. Similar differences were exhibited in the responses to the statement 'management has the welfare of their employees at heart'; while only 18% of those in domestics and 42% in captives agreed with the statement, as many as 72% in the third party sub-sector did so.

There were almost no gender differences in responses to these statements. However, tenure also affected the direction of most ratings. Longer serving individuals were more likely to believe that management and employees have common aims, that management had the welfare of employees at heart and to have similar values to their organisation.

6.10 *HR as a substitute for independent employee representation*

As might be expected from a survey of UNITES members, only a small number (16%) believed that the presence of HR removed the need for trade unions, yet again this overall finding conceals significant variations. While only 10% of domestic members consider that HR obviated the need for unions, this proportion rose to 28% for captive members and 44% for those in third-parties (Table 11).

Furthermore, while only 15% in domestics had turned to HR to get problems resolved, 32% in third-parties and 43% in captives had done so. Such figures would appear to reflect differences in HR practice between the 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% of domestic members thought HR had successfully taken action to resolve their problems compared to 40% of captive and 59% of third-party members.

From another perspective, though, these figures indicate that a majority of members in captives (60%) and a sizable minority in third-party centres (41%) who had turned to HR did *not* have their problems resolved to their satisfaction. In addition, for those

who had not turned to HR with a problem, the two most frequent responses were to do nothing (55% captives, 27% third-parties) or to seek support from friends and personal networks (23% captives, 25% third-parties). The latter response suggests a potential role for UNITES if it is able to connect with those employees who have not been able to gain redress from HR management. UNITES might be able to give advice or to play the role of advocate on condition that becomes sufficiently embedded in employees' social networks.

It does not follow that sophisticated and effective HR practices prevail in the international-facing centres. Budhwar et al (2005) have already emphasised the limitations in policies of career progression, development and retention. In recent years, sessions at Nasscom conferences focused on labour management and HR issues have been dominated by discussions of the need to develop coherent HRM approaches in place of existing *ad hoc* and 'firefighting' practices (Taylor and Bain, 2006b: 76-100).

Table 11: Role of HR

	Captive		Indian 3 rd 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 ^a	69	56%	27	68%	113	19%	209	28%
HR's success at listening to and understanding problems ^a	65	53%	26	65%	107	18%	198	27%
HR's success at taking actions that solve problems ^a	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%

Note. ^a Represents % answering very/quite successful of the 184 who turned to HR

Recalling the telling critique of HRM as it emerged in the UK, there is often a contradiction between 'rhetoric' and 'reality' (Legge, 2004). Interview evidence provides some scathing criticism of HR, particularly by this employee with seven years' experience of working in domestic, third-party and captive call centres.

I disagree that HR would solve all the employees' problems. That is absolutely a misconception. They have made it a rule that the employees have to turn to the HR whatever happens. Though the HR department is approachable by employees, they are not too friendly or responsive to respond to employees' concerns...In the last seven years, no HR department has ever helped me with my problems...HR is misguiding the people that they can be approached. We [UNITES] are the people whom they should be approaching.

In sum, sufficient evidence exists 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).

6.11 Perceived obstacles to joining UNITES

From several perspectives, the findings in this section provide important insights. From the standpoint of UNITES, as it attempts to develop its membership base, the findings help to identify the issues that its members believe are preventing non-member colleagues from joining. In this sense, the evidence here acts as a counterpoint to the findings presented in Sections 6.3 and 6.4, which identify respectively the reasons for joining and the working conditions that might prompt employees to join. In Table 12 we present in descending order the ‘very important’ responses for each of the 14 items listed in the questionnaire.

These 14 items may be divided into a number of categories. First, there are those problems which might be seen to be related explicitly to employers’ ‘exclusivist’ strategies, namely companies’ opposition to UNITES, employees fear that they might be terminated for joining UNITES and employees thinking that joining UNITES will affect their careers. Second, there are problems which be seen to relate to employers’ ‘inclusivist’ strategies. These are the perception that high salaries mean that employees do not need to join UNITES, that BPO professionals see themselves as professionals, that employees believe that the employer is all they need, that many BPO professionals do not see the need for UNITES, that many BPO professionals believe that they will be promoted, that employees believe that any problems they have will be solved by managers and, finally, that employers have captured the ‘hearts and minds’ of employees. A third category may regarded as industry structural factors, namely, that much of the workforce is young and inexperienced and high attrition makes it hard to recruit and build a stable membership. A final category can be seen to be mainly ideological, namely, that many employees do not believe in trade unions and that unions in BPO are seen as damaging to the Indian industry’s growth.

Of course, it is not always possible to make a sharp conceptual distinction between these categories and there is some overlap between the meanings that might be attached to these perceived problems. For example, high attrition, as an industry structural factor, is obviously related to the impact of high salaries. Nevertheless, such distinctions between the categories is analytically helpful.

First, we begin with the problems in the ‘exclusivist’ category. The most frequent perceived obstacle in the way of increasing recruitment 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% and 49% respectively) did so than in domestic centres (60%). More than one-in-two (54% 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%) and less so amongst those in captives (45%) and third party centres (25%). In addition, 45% overall believed that joining UNITES would affect their careers. Again this was more frequently expressed by respondents in domestic centres (52%) than by those in Indian third party operations (42%) and captives (22%). These are very important

findings indeed suggesting that large numbers of employees believe that they will be penalised by their employers for joining UNITES.

Interview data illustrates members' perceptions of BPO employers' explicit anti-unionism. Of considerable interest is the testimony of the member who maintained UNITES' website 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.

In cases where there is a person who is courageous and does not bother, the IT will not have to have a particular reason to terminate a person. Being a union member can be one of those reasons. Again, when they sign their contract letter initially, they sign and they say they will not be a member of a union. This is another reason why they do not want to say that they are a member (Bangalore captive).

More broadly, it is believed that reprisals are taken not just against known union members, but against any employees who appear to be troublesome and raise their voices. A Bangalore member with seven years experience in domestic, captive and third party call centres recalled.

Whenever we go to the smoking zone or elsewhere, when there is a problem, people discuss it. We used to discuss among ourselves how things go on, how to improve things and so on. We cannot raise our voices because once we do that there will be a black mark there. That will affect our appraisal and this fear was there in everybody. Normally, we are scapegoats, keep working and get out. If anyone raises his voice, there is trouble for him.

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.

Some evidence already exists in the public domain of employers 'excluding' employees identified as union members or otherwise troublesome. Ramesh (2004b: 17) reported firms as 'nipping out any sprouts of organisation' by forcing agents 'who are vocal against management decisions to quit...through carefully planned retrenchment mechanisms'. Cooke (2005:6) described the case of an employee of Wipro Spectramind in Delhi who organised a protest against enforced unpaid work, lack of breaks and intimidatory management and was peremptorily sacked. Several unionised employees previously interviewed by one of the authors believed that if they were to 'come out' then they would be disadvantaged in respect of promotion, appraisals and pay rises and would be allocated less desirable tasks or shifts (Taylor and Bain, 2008b). A smaller number of interviewees were convinced that they would be 'terminated' if management knew of their membership.

Given the evidence of perceptions regarding the reluctance of employees to join UNITES for fear of reprisals, including being sacked, it is necessary to reflect upon the pertinent ILO Conventions. Firstly, there is Convention 87 (Freedom of

Association and Protection of the Right to Organise) and, secondly, there is the Convention 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining). The evidence suggests breaches of these conventions. At the very least, many employees in the 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.

Table 12: Main problems facing UNITES over recruitment (% answering ‘very important’)

	Captive		Indian third-party		Domestic		Total	
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%

Notes. Statements rated on four-point scale.

Turning to the ‘inclusivist’ obstacles listed, Table 12 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%) and those in captives (58%) far fewer in third parties (24%) believed this was a very important factor. Next in order of importance (54% overall) was the perception that BPO employees see themselves as professionals. Again this was seen as a very important problem by more respondents in domestic centres (60%) than in captives (44%) and third party centres (35%).

Most of the remaining ‘inclusivist’ obstacles (employees believe that the employer is all they need, many 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% of respondents in third parties believed that the successful solving of employees' problems by managers was a very important problem.

The most frequently cited of these is BPO employees seeing themselves as professionals which was cited by 89% of respondents overall as a very or quite important problem. As can be seen, there is little difference in the perceptions of those between the sub-sectors. Next in terms of overall importance is the perception that high salaries would deter employees from joining UNITES. In this respect, there were some differences between members in the segments. While 91% of those in captives saw this as problem facing UNITES, this reduced to 86% for members in domestics and 70% for members in third parties. Related to the questions of salaries and professional identity were perceptions regarding promotion prospects. As many as 85% overall believed that employees' belief that they would be promoted was an important obstacle facing UNITES as it attempted to recruit non-members. This was felt most strongly amongst domestic respondents (90%) and then captives (75%) and then least strongly amongst members in Indian third-party centres (68%).

Next in terms of importance is the belief that employees believe that any problems employees have will be solved by their managers, as reported by 76% overall and with only marginal differences between respondents. Closely related to this as a factor and in terms of findings are perceptions that employees do not see the need for UNITES (74% overall) and employees believe that the employer is 'all they need' (68% overall). Least important of all the 'inclusive' items and indeed of all those listed was that 'employers have captured the hearts and minds of employees'. In overall terms, 43% of members surveyed thought that this was very or quite important as an obstacle facing UNITES. Nevertheless, there are differences between the sub-samples. Only 35% of respondents from domestic centres believed that this was an important obstacle facing UNITES, compared to 62% in captive centres and 68% in third parties. In order to understand the meaning of these findings it is important to pause for some reflection. Even in the international-facing centres more between one-in-three and one-in-four of respondents do not believe that the employers' capturing employees' 'hearts and minds' is in any way important in deterring members to join. Indeed only 14% overall employers had 'captured the hearts and minds of employees' and only a quarter thought that the perception that unions might damage the growth of India's BPO industry, would prove a deterrent.

In sum, 'inclusivism' would certainly appear to present a major obstacle for UNITES as they seek to increase their presence in the Indian BPO industry. Undeniably, respondents perceive factors which bind employees to employers in a common and shared undertaking as influential. Clearly, they impact upon employees' belief that they require an independent organisation to represent their interests. Nevertheless, there do appear to be limitations on the extent to which companies have successfully prosecuted their cultural control strategies. Specific mention must be made of the fact that only 14% of employees overall reported that they believed employers' capture of the 'hearts and minds' of employees. The survey evidence thus provides some support for the claims made in the literature for the effectiveness of 'exclusivist' and 'inclusivist' strategies on the part of employers (Noronha and d'Cruz, 2006).

We turn now to discuss the problems which arise from structural characteristic of the BPO industry. The youth and inexperience of the workforce was considered to be very important by 59% of respondents overall. This was regarded as more of a problem by domestic members (59%) than by those in captives (45%) and then by those in third parties (24%).

The question of high attrition making it hard to recruit and build a stable membership requires some discussion. While almost one-in-two (54%) in domestic centres perceived this to be very important as a problem facing UNITES, around one-in-three in both captives (34%) and third parties (32%) did so. This resonates with what we know already of the tendency (observed above) 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.

While it is abundantly clear that high rates of attrition confront UNITES with a major problem, they may present it with an opportunity. Notwithstanding general employer opposition to unions, it is perhaps significant that certain employers have conceded that unions may be able to play a role that assists them. Both industry founding father, Raman Roy (<http://www.upi.com/Hi-Tech/view.php?StoryID=20051107-094041-5729r>), and the CEO of Progeon (*Economic Times*, 17.11.05) have conceded that unions might help the industry to control attrition. In an unprecedented meeting with UNITES in November 2006, Nasscom's President Kiran Karnik intimated that unions might help reduce turnover and regulate the labour market (Interview UNITES officer, 19.11.06). While attrition remains perhaps the most acute problem facing employers and the industry, and while it may be that certain gestures have been made that imply a breach in the employers' anti-union position, the concrete challenge facing UNITES is to build clusters of members in the fast-flowing currents of employee mobility.

Finally, we consider the more overtly ideological difficulties facing UNITES. Almost half the respondents (47%) thought that the fact that their many BPO employees do not believe in unions was a very important problem. Finally, only around a quarter (26%) of respondents thought that the fact that unions are seen as damaging the Indian industry's growth was a very important problem. There was some unevenness in the degree to which this problem was perceived. While around one-in-three in third party centres and domestic perceived this as a very important problem only 10% did so in captives.

7. Conclusions

It is not that the pessimistic scenario that emphasises the difficulties facing UNITES is entirely incorrect. There is considerable evidence that UNITES members perceive and indeed may have experienced companies' combatative anti-unionism, which causes significant numbers to be reluctant to declare their membership for fear of incurring reprisals. Clearly, the messages issuing forth from Nasscom and employers that trade unionism is unwanted and unnecessary in the context of Indian BPO do have some purchase amongst employees, whose middle-class backgrounds, youth and general lack of experience and understanding do not automatically predispose them to think in collectivist terms.

In addition, it is clear that many employees do have a profound sense of professional identity (d'Cruz and Noronha, 2006) and aspire to pursuing a career in the industry. High levels of attrition undoubtedly contribute to many employees believing that individualistic solutions, notably moving their employer to secure better paid employment or promoted posts, are possible rather than the less obvious route of collectivism. Nevertheless as much of the questionnaire evidence indicates and the employee interviews illuminate, the promises and expectations of these hopeful graduates are by no means always fulfilled. The testimony of this call centre employee from a Bangalore third party is apposite.

More than 50% come to this industry just for the sake of the money and enough to make a good career, but in the process some fail to accomplish that. Somehow or other they get into the tangle with the management. Others know that and they cannot give their voice for the others with the fear that they might lose their job.

It is important to emphasise that a singular focus on the obstacles facing UNITES neglects the fact that a majority of UNITES members do not see their interests and those of their employers as identical. Very few believe that they and their colleagues have had their 'hearts and minds' captured through the success of cultural corporate strategies.

Nor, is there universal support for the view that sophisticated HRM policies and practices universally act as a substitute for, and render unnecessary, the independent representation of employees. Both objectively and in terms of attitudes of the unionised employees' attitudes expressed here, there is a democratic deficit in the Indian BPO industry.

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 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 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. Not least important of all the findings presented above are those on work-life interface which show how the intense work pressures spill over into non-work life.

It is not being argued here that the pressurised and frequently oppressive working conditions automatically of themselves create the conditions for trade unionism to flourish. Nevertheless, the position that Indian BPO occupies in the transnational servicing chains of the corporations based in the global North has led to lean regimes in which cost-cutting imperatives dominate. The fundamental dynamics of this broader political economy ultimately creates an experience of work as intense, pressurised and often frequently stressful. These pressures in international-facing sectors of the industry are at least replicated in the rapidly growing domestic segments of the industry.

There is evidence that Indian BPO employees in both voice and business processes are being driven harder through the euphemistically named process excellence agenda (Nasscom-McKinsey, 2005: 126) in order to compensate for rising costs. The significance of this intensification is to highlight further the potential gap between employees' expectations that the BPO industry would provide stimulating work and a prestigious career and the frequent reality of repetitive and tightly monitored work routines and the fact that, despite real career opportunities, not everyone can gain promotion nor escape the phones or routine data processing. Notwithstanding the attraction of levels of pay that are generally unavailable elsewhere for these graduates, the quotidian experiences of demanding work provides an inescapable context.

The evidence is unequivocal that there is a constituency for UNITES in Indian BPO, notwithstanding contradictory attitudes amongst BPO employees, the opposition of employers and the benefits of the job. 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. None of this is to advocate that UNITES adopts a conflictual or adversarial role. 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.

UNITES has made genuine progress, albeit limited by its youth and inexperience, in recruiting from the virgin workforces of Indian 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. 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.

Ultimately, though, UNITES' progress will depend crucially its own organising activities and experiences. A member working for a captive operation based in Hyderabad expressed the possibilities for organic growth which arise through engaging positively with wider layers of employees at workplace level.

If you have 15 good people who understand you well, those 15 are going to draw even more members. That chain goes on. That 15 will get another 15 strong people. That is the way you can build...

We would agree with Ofresno et al (2007: 552) that the BPO 'industry represents an entirely new frontier for organising trade unions' and the record of UNITES suggests that a cautiously positive evaluation of its early achievements is appropriate. There is certainly no shortage of issues around which it can organise and begin to redress the democratic deficit that currently exists in Indian BPO.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire Design

Demographic and work profile: Questions were included on: type of company (captive, Indian third-party, domestic), job title, the extent to which work included back-office work, the type of calls handled (inbound, outbound), working hours and shifts (contracted and actual), age, gender, contractual status, time worked in current workplace, and orientation to their present job (long-term, part of a career in the company, part of a career in different BPO companies, part of a career outside the BPO industry or a job which is not part of a career). Questions about whether they were union members and when they had joined were included to ensure the study focused only on members.

Reasons for joining UNITES: Drawing on research distinguishing between collective and instrumental/individualist reasons for joining unions (Waddington and Whitston, 1997), respondents were asked to choose from 14 options. In addition, respondents rated 15 factors on a four-point scale of importance related to the job and working conditions which may make BPO employees join UNITES. These factors were drawn from previous research which has identified these as typical of call centre/BPO environments (Taylor et al, 2003) and research specifically undertaken in the Indian context (d’Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2006a).

Experience of pressure: Related to the job or work-related factors which may prompt employees to join UNITES, is a list of 28 items which may contribute to employees experiencing pressure at work. As above, these items were developed from previous research conducted in call centre environments and from research undertaken in India which identified conditions particular to the offshored and outsourced environment (d’Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Taylor and Bain, 2006a)

Management effectiveness: The success of management with respect to 18 aspects of the job was rated on a four-point scale from ‘very unsuccessful’ to ‘very successful’. These factors were drawn from previous UK research (Taylor et al., 2003).

Attitudes to Management in General: In addition, four items, which respondents were asked to rate on a four-point scale of agreement, addressed general attitudes towards management and were adapted from the British Social Attitudes Survey and Employment in Britain Survey (Gallie and White, 1993).

Role of HR: A section of the questionnaire was dedicated to the role and effectiveness of HR in solving employees’ problems. A single question, answered ‘yes’ or ‘no’, asked whether respondents believed the presence of HR removed the need for trade unions. An additional question asked if these members had turned to HR to solve a specific problem. For those who had done so, open-ended questions enquired about the nature of the problem and respondents were asked to rate HR’s success on a four-point scale in three respects: being available, listening/understanding, and action taken. Those who had not turned to HR were asked how they had dealt with their problems, choosing from seven options. These ranged from self-help (doing nothing, relying on friends/relatives/team manager, thinking differently about the problem) to more drastic options (moving to another team, looking for another job, changing career).

Obstacles to increasing membership: Respondents were asked to rate the importance on a four point scale of 14 items representing barriers to trade unionism within the Indian BPO industry. The list of items drew on the qualitative research of d’Cruz and Noronha (2006) and Taylor and Bain (2006a; 2008) identifying unique conditions in the industry which may undermine collectivist attitudes. These included: company opposition to UNITES, a belief that joining will affect one’s career, fear of termination, high attrition, the perception of themselves as professionals, high salaries, a belief that there is no need for a union, a belief that unions will damage the industry’s growth, a belief in employers being sufficient, a belief that problems will be solved by managers, a belief that they will be promoted, the youth and inexperience of the workforce, and a belief that employers have captured employees’ ‘hearts and minds’.