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'Unionising' the new spaces of the new economy? *Alternative* labour organising in India's IT Enabled Services–Business Process Outsourcing industry

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the lived experiences and aspirational social constructions of call centre work and employment in India's high profile IT Enabled Services–Business Process Outsourcing (ITES–BPO) industry; the ways in which they differ from those previously documented amongst call centre workers in the Global North (specifically the UK); and the consequences of that geographical reconfiguration of offshored call centre work for the replicability in India of workplace collective bargaining strategies successfully developed in some UK call centres. These issues are analysed using new empirical evidence from a regional survey of 511 non-unionised ITES–BPO workers and 42 in-depth interviews in India's National Capital Region. Based on this analysis, the paper then discusses the operation, outcomes and ongoing challenges faced by the newly formed 'Union for ITES Professionals' (UNITES Pro) in developing an *alternative* occupational organising model better suited to the particular needs, motivations and preferences of India's young, mobile, call centre workers. The empirical analysis presented in the paper is located, therefore, within wider debates on the role of geographical context in shaping possibilities for organising white-collar service workers at different ends of global service chains in the new economy.

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1. Introduction

'There are some notable biases and blindspots in the research literature on workers in the contemporary world. One of these... is a tendency to focus on Western workers. Wage labour exists anywhere and everywhere today and it is thus incumbent on analysts to present something of this promiscuous diversity.'

(Castree et al., 2004, pp. xv–xvi).

The emergent structures of work and employment accompanying the shift to the new economy are widely debated. While there exists no single neat definition, the 'new economy' refers to a major reorientation of the productive, reproductive, and institutional structures of advanced economies since the late 1970s, involving deregulation, deindustrialisation, the rise of services, use of ICTs to reorganise business, new forms of 'flexible' work and employment, and the globalisation of those new forms of work and employment through offshoring (Martin, 2007, pp. 15–23; Perrons et al., 2006, pp. 2–5). In contrast to celebratory policy and media hype, 'flexibility' for many workers means increased workloads, less predictable work schedules, more unsocial work hours, and greater insecurity as employers demand they work longer and

harder to minimise labour costs (Carnoy, 2002; Reich, 2000). Reinforcing these problems, labour unions as the dominant form of collective worker representation and advocacy throughout most of the twentieth century are in decline, as they struggle to confront these new work and employment realities. The result is ongoing hardship for many service workers.

In the Global North there has emerged a range of postindustrial labour organising responses to these challenges. Some labour unions have experimented with new forms of 'social movement unionism' and 'network unionism' as a means for securing growth and renewal in the new economy. Studies have also documented the emergence of labour organisations mobilising professional service workers through new forms of 'occupational unionism'. Yet, despite similar (and different) challenges to the labour movement in the Global South, new forms of labour organising targeting off-shore service workers in these 'other' locations remain under-researched (Castree et al., 2004; Kelly, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2008). This limits our understanding of the role of geographical context in shaping possibilities for organising workers at different ends of global service chains.

In response, this paper explores labour organising amongst call centre workers in India compared with the UK. Call centres exemplify new forms of Taylorised information-service work (Russell, 2008, p. 197). However, while unions in the UK have achieved some success in organising call centre workers, this success has not been replicated by India's established 'old' labour unions,

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despite the fact that, in many ways, India's call centre workers experience *greater* workplace indignities than do those in the UK (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Significantly however, there has emerged a new Indian organising initiative – the Union for Information Technology Enabled Services Professionals (UNITES Pro) – that has begun successfully to collectivise call centre workers in ways that India's established labour unions have not.

To analyse the development of this new organising initiative, and its potential to replicate the organising successes of unions in UK call centres, we explore empirically how call centre work offshored from the Global North is geographically reconfigured in the Indian context. Our core argument concerns the need to engage directly with the geographical specificities of place which determine the desires for – and meanings of – representation amongst Indian call centre workers. As such, we question the viability of recent calls for UNITES Pro to replicate in India a workplace collective bargaining model successfully developed in some UK call centres around traditional issues of wages, hours, holidays, and discipline and grievance, and for UNITES Pro 'to act more overtly as a trade union in the making' (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 46 also Taylor and Bain, 2008). Rather, we argue, the successful organisation of India's young, upwardly mobile, and highly educated call centre workers necessitates an *alternative* occupational organising model that connects workers across multiple worksites, using strategies and methods rooted in Indian workers' differential experiences of call centre work vis-à-vis UK call centre workers, and in the alternative social constructions and commonly understood meanings of call centre 'work', call centre 'workers', and 'unions' in the Indian context. To be clear, our aim is not to question the need to organise India's call centre workers but, rather, the most geographically appropriate form which that organising should take.

2. (Overcoming) the limits to organising in the new economy

Contemporary transformations of work and employment present major challenges to traditional workplace collective bargaining models developed in an earlier industrial era based on full-time employees in long-term employment relationships, to whom organisers appeal on the basis of wages and benefits as employees of specific companies. Organising strategies within this model were premised on large, centralised workplaces with few entrance gates, regular shift changes, and a large, stable, homogenous workforce (Herod, 2007). However, as employers seek to cut costs and spread market risk in pursuit of 'flexibility', complex subcontracting relations break the mutual dependency between workers and employers that was previously central to the labour movement: 'those with the real power over the contracting process... are generally not accessible to the workers doing the work. Meaningful collective bargaining, the *sine qua non* of trade union organisation is impossible' (Wills, 2009, pp. 441–445). Additionally, the rise of individualised contracts, spatial dispersal of workers across multiple work sites, and high levels of job mobility have furthered the 'erosion of the workplace as a basis for long-term security and collective solidarity' (Benner, 2003, p. 1; also Hossfeld, 1995). Similarly, new residential and commuting patterns mean that the spatial boundaries between people's work and social lives are more distinct than in the past (Hyman, 1999), undermining many of the localised networks which historically supported trade union membership (Herod, 2007). These obstacles are reinforced by a neoliberal political climate, and government concerns to temper union militancy to help foster inward investment (*ibid.*).

In response to these challenges, labour unions have experimented with new 'post-Fordist' or 'postindustrial' models of labour organising (Herod et al., 2007, p. 249; Milkman and Voss, 2004), in order to organise greater numbers of workers, and to engage in

more effective organising campaigns against employers (Herod, 2007, p. 134; Savage and Wills, 2004). One new organising form is labelled 'community-unionism' or 'social movement unionism', in which labour unions have rethought their organisational structures, strategies and activities and forged new alliances beyond the workplace with non-labour organisations, including religious groups, community organisations and other political campaigns (e.g. Bronfenbrenner et al., 1998; Tillman and Cummings, 1999). The aims of community-unionism are: to increase the scale, influence and power of organising drives to tackle questions of economic injustice that span communities beyond any single workplace; to reach non-union workers traditionally marginalised from trade unions; to reach contingent workers in difficult to reach worksites; and to create new allies beyond the walls of the workplace and thereby increase pressure on employers resisting union recognition (Wills, 2001, p. 466).

In addition to new organising activities by established unions, there have also emerged new labour organisations amongst higher paid professional service workers which resurrect earlier forms of 'occupational unionism' (Cobble, 1991; Cobble, 1996). These stress employment security within a particular industry and other portable rights and benefits as workers move between different work sites. As an example, Chris Benner has documented new forms of labour organising in California's Silicon Valley based on occupation-specific craft guild structures which bring together 'groups of workers who are linked more closely by their similar skills, social bonds, and regional labour market experiences than by their position in their employing organisation' (Benner, 2003, p. 182). These labour organisations combine advocacy and service functions with a strong focus on workers uniting to share knowledge, enhance their skills, build contacts for possible new jobs, and protect themselves from employment insecurity (Benner, 1999; Benner and Dean, 2000). Similarly, Danielle Van Jaarsveld (2004) has documented new forms of postindustrial labour organising in Washington State's software sector by the Washington Alliance of Technology Workers (Washtech) in response to work and employment insecurities faced by temporary workers in regard to legal protections, benefits, training, and career advancement opportunities (Washtech, 2002)¹. Other interesting examples include Alliance@IBM (Diamond and Freeman, 2002), TechsUnite and the Australian IT Workers Alliance. Studies have also documented new forms of 'open-source unionism' (Freeman and Rogers, 2002) which target hard-to-unionise workplaces using e-mails, listservs, chat rooms and websites to bring together workers across multiple locations (Schmid, 2002).

In sum, while the workplace remains an important focus for organising in the new economy, in itself it is an insufficient basis for improving the terms and conditions of work and employment for many service workers (Anderson et al., 2009). As explored here, there exists a broad range of alternatives for organising workers and exerting pressure on employers beyond workplace collective bargaining. These include craft guild structures, occupational unionism, community-unionism and online worker networks. Problematically however, our appreciation and understanding of this range of new economy organising alternatives, and of the geographical replicability of organising best practice in different contexts, is limited within economic geography by a predominant analytical focus on the Global North (Coe et al., 2007; Murphy, 2008)². The paucity of economic geographical analyses of contempo-

¹ Washtech is an affiliate of the Communication Workers of America union, but has de-emphasised collective bargaining as the most appropriate form for improving working conditions for its members in favour of mutual aid and political action.

² Important counter-examples include Kelly (2002) on the constraints faced by those seeking to unionise industrial workers in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines; and Cumbers et al. (2008) on the potential for building global union federations in global production networks.

rary service work and employment in the Global South raises important questions. What are the major obstacles to unionising white-collar service workers in the Global South? In what ways are those obstacles similar to – and different from – those documented in advanced economies in the Global North? What types of postindustrial labour organising drives are currently being developed to overcome those obstacles in the Global South? And what is the potential of those organising drives to replicate the kinds of organising successes seen amongst white-collar service workers working in the ‘same’ jobs in the Global North? In response, this paper analyses the alternative organising approach developed by the newly established Union for ITES Professionals (UNITES Pro) to organise call centre workers in India’s ITES–BPO industry³ and its potential to replicate the organising successes achieved in some UK call centres through traditional workplace collective bargaining.

3. India’s ITES–BPO industry – and why its call centre workers needs organising

India is the prime global destination for call centre work offshored from English-speaking countries in the Global North, particularly within banking, insurance, technology and telecoms, as well as travel, retail, media and entertainment, energy and utilities (Nasscom–Everest 2008, p. 38). Major UK firms that have offshored their call centre operations to India – either to third-party providers, or by establishing their own in-house or ‘captive’ operations in India – include Abbey, Prudential, Norwich Union, British Telecom, and Lloyds-TSB (Taylor and Bain, 2005). Indeed, as many as 400 of the Fortune 500 companies now have call centres operations in India (Budhwar et al., 2006, p. 882; Hunter, 2006). In addition, there is a growing ‘domestic’ ITES–BPO segment serving Indian consumer markets (Nasscom–Everest, 2008, p. 47, 164). Major established call centre hubs in India are the ‘Tier 1’ cities of Bangalore, Mumbai, and Delhi. Emerging hubs include Pune, Kolkata, Chennai and Hyderabad as operating costs increase in the first mover cities (*ibid.*: 62).

Call centres in India are classified under the broader ITES–BPO category (*ibid.*: 5), of which ‘60–65% of services fall within the call centre space and 35–40% are back office activities’ (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 38). Employment growth has been impressive: in 2003 India’s ITES–BPO industry employed 180,000 workers; this has since increased sharply to 704,000 workers (Nasscom–Everest 2008, p. 28), with projected figures of 1.4 million workers by 2010 (Nasscom, 2006). The attraction of India as a focus for offshoring call centres from the UK, US and Australia lies in its large pool of English-speaking graduates (Nasscom–Everest, 2008), and lower labour costs supporting overall operating cost savings of 25–50% (Nasscom, 2007; Nasscom–McKinsey, 2005). Also, since 1990, the Indian government has implemented a raft of economic liberalisation strategies to encourage foreign direct investment. This has been reinforced by the abolition of India’s former telephony monopolies which, alongside significant global expansion in bandwidth, continue to reduce unit costs for telephony. Growth has also been supported institutionally through the activities of Nasscom (the National Association of Software and Service Companies) which promotes the ITES–BPO industry as India’s flagship sunrise industry⁴:

‘India’s offshore industries... have played a major role in transforming India from a slow-growth economy with recurring balance of payments problems to a fast-growth economy generating ample foreign exchange surpluses. Millions of Indians have benefited directly from these industries, and the industries’ contribution to the nation’s economy and global standing has been immense’.

(NASSCOM–McKinsey, 2005, p. 22).

Nasscom is also convinced that working conditions within the ITES–BPO sector obviate the need for collective action and unions:

‘In the ITES–BPO industry in India working conditions are amongst the best in the world and the complaints of individual workers are listened to and addressed... Wages are so good there is no need for unions in this sector’. (Kiran Karnik, then Nasscom President, speech to Conflux e-governance conference October 2005).

Nevertheless, India’s call centres have recently been subject to criticisms in the national press regarding work and employment conditions (e.g. *The Times of India*, 2005a, b; *The Hindu*, 2005; *The Hindustan Times*, 2007; *The Economic Times*, 2007, 2008a). Importantly, these criticisms also find empirical basis in recent academic studies, the key findings of which are presented below.

At the core of recent critiques, studies have documented the dominance of a low complexity, routinised ‘mass production’ call centre model in India (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 2005, p. 277; Taylor et al., 2008); its implications for the worker experience in relation to the intensity of repetitive, scripted ‘production-line’ work (Remesh, 2004, 2005; Noronha and d’Cruz, 2006; McMillin, 2006); and the negative impacts of rigidly enforced targets, and extensive monitoring and surveillance on employee autonomy and employment security (Taylor and Bain, 2008). As a measure of this pressured work environment, Batt et al. (2005, p. 14) documented median work intensities in Indian call centres serving international clients as 90 customers per employee per day, and for domestic call centres 100 a day (based on average call handling times of 8 min and 4.3 min, respectively). Additionally, 93% of international call centres and 92% of domestic call centres implement electronic monitoring of workers. Indeed, the sheer range of parameters on which Indian agents are monitored is also problematic, including: phone etiquette, average handling time, adherence to script, documentation, knowledge of product, display of cordiality or warmth, clarity in the message transmitted, fluency in English, mother tongue influence, errors in speaking, pacification of irate customers, opening and closing, and apologies (d’Cruz and Noronha, 2006, p. 354). Failure of agents to meet prescribed benchmarks results in corrective action or indeed termination of employment (Remesh, 2005).

Additionally, studies have documented health problems amongst Indian call centre workers, including: muscle tension, headaches, eyestrains, RSI, voice loss, hearing problems, stress, nausea, dizziness, and panic attacks (e.g. Pradhan and Abraham, 2005; Ofreneo et al., 2007; Poster, 2007; Remesh, 2005). The additional impacts of night working (to serve Western clients in real time) include sleep deprivation, loss of appetite, digestive disorders, and social isolation from friends and family (Mattingly, 2005). Call centre work in India has also been criticized as ‘culturally imperialist’ in its eroding workers’ traditional Indian identities. Many agents in international-facing call centres must use anglicized pseudonyms as part of a locational masking strategy to encourage client confidence when revealing personal details (e.g. Singh and Pandey, 2005). Agents also undergo accent neutralization to eradicate their MTI (‘mother tongue influence’) to smooth customer interactions. Nevertheless, clients dissatisfied at having

³ Other ITES–BPO sectors include data processing, transcription, and back-office clerical.

⁴ Nasscom’s claims find empirical support: the ITES–BPO industry accounted for 13% of India’s GDP growth (exceeding 7% p.a.) in 2003–04 and 2005–06 (Hay Group–Manpower India 2006). Moreover, India’s ITES–BPO exports for 2008 totaled \$10.9 billion, an increase of 34% during the previous five years (Nasscom–Everest 2008, p. 28).

Table 1
Summary of fieldwork and research participant sample in India's National Capital Region (NCR = Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon: July 2006–August 2008).

Targeted cohort	Job roles included in cohort sample	Employer types covered by cohort sample
Call centre workers in ITES/BPO sector 7 interviews with call centre agents and 2 call centre managers	Freshers and agents (various titles), team leaders, manager, director	7 different current employers: including large (1000+ seats) MNC captives and Indian third parties (UK, US Australian and European customer bases); and smaller Indian domestics (250 seats and less)
434 survey participants	ITES–BPO workers at range of levels in the employment hierarchy	53 different ITES–BPO employers in NCR (spread across MNC captives, MNC third parties, Indian third parties, and domestics; inbound and outbound – see Table 2)
Ex-call centre workers 6 interviews 77 survey participants	Former customer care executives, team leaders and process trainers	Large (1000+ seats) 3rd party and in-house multinationals; and smaller 3rd party and in-house Indian domestics
Labour organisers targeting ITES–BPO 8 interviews	Delhi-based directors, financial director, lead organisers, secretary	UNITES Pro, ITPF, New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI)
Recruitment and placement agencies 7 interviews	Regional manager, assistant manager quality and training, resourcing executive, recruiters (various titles)	
Voice accent/language trainers 8 interviews	Language trainer, senior language trainer, voice trainer, zonal manager channel sales, ceo, senior trainer corporate	Mix of small independent 'mom and pop' shops serving domestic and international markets, and larger local subsidiaries of multinational companies
Local researchers focusing on ITES/BPO sector 4 interviews	Researchers in local economic development agencies, labour research organisations and NGOs	

to deal with a non-native speaker, or else resentful of job losses surrounding offshoring, verbally abuse agents, often with racial overtones (Mirchandani, 2004). Pradhan and Abraham (2005) have documented websites providing callers with phone numbers of Indian call centres and Hindi swear words. Overall, employees' abilities to challenge these conditions are limited by top-down communication structures and a lack of real participation in decision-making (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 38).

Previous studies, therefore, have developed a powerful case for organising India's call centre workers. Indeed, scholars have argued that these workers experience greater workplace indignities than do call centre workers in the Global North (e.g. Pradhan and Abraham, 2005; Taylor and Bain, 2005; Mirchandani, 2003). However, while labour unions in the Global North have achieved some success in organising call centre workers (especially the UK), this success has not been replicated by India's established labour unions. The geographical causes of this disjuncture, and the significance of an alternative labour organisation that *has* successfully begun to organise Indian call centre workers, form the focus of this paper.

4. Methods and sources

Fieldwork was conducted in India's National Capital Region (Delhi, Noida and Gurgaon) in five phases: July 2006, December 2006, May 2007, November 2007 and August 2008. In total, 42 in-depth interviews were conducted (each 1–2 h) with call centre agents, managers, ex-call centre agents, labour organisers, and economic development officials, as well as representatives from different labour market intermediaries (Table 1)⁵.

This paper also draws on results from a regional survey of ITES–BPO workers in Noida and Gurgaon in May 2007. The survey explored: (i) workers' educational and social backgrounds; (ii) career trajectories (prior, during and subsequent to call centre employment); (iii) use of different labour market intermediaries (recruiters, culture trainers, accent trainers, etc.); (iv) health issues arising from ITES–BPO work; and (v) labour organising preferences. A ser-

ies of access constraints prevented us from administering the survey directly in the field⁶. To overcome these constraints we used an experienced local team of fieldworkers from the Indian Market Research Bureau (15 male, 5 female) whose demographic characteristics allowed them to circumvent many of these barriers to access⁷. To ensure integrity of the data, we were present in Delhi for meetings with the data collection team during the setup of the survey. Follow-up calls to research participants further verified data quality. To minimise potential snowballing problems, a maximum of 30 respondents was allowed from any single current employer. Employers were selected on the basis of two well-known call centre clusters in Noida and Gurgaon, focused on multiple types of call centre employers (MNC captives, MNC third parties, Indian third parties, and domestics) working in a range of vertical markets. Our concern was independently to capture worker experiences of as broad a range of call centre employers as possible – compare this with an influential recent study of India's ITES–BPO industry (Taylor and Bain, 2005) focused exclusively on third-party call centres and with access sanctioned by Nasscom, the Indian IT/ITES federation whose political interests are to promote this sector. The survey yielded a dataset of 511 ITES–BPO workers (including 77 ex-workers) moving between 192 different employers. Importantly, the characteristics of our survey sample (Table 2) are consistent with the India findings from the recent Global Call Centre Industry Project (Batt et al., 2005)⁸. The significance of our survey dataset should also be understood in relation to another recent survey by Taylor et al. (2008) of 879 *existing* members of UNITES Pro. We argue that to analyse fully the limits to, and potential for, organising in India's ITES–BPO industry, it is also important to survey *non-organised* workers (only 3 respondents in our survey were members of UNITES Pro).

⁶ Access constraints resulted from corporate security outside call centres in the wake of: labour poaching by rival firms, increasing concerns about corporate confidentiality due to documented cases of agent fraud, and the Mumbai terrorist attacks in July 2006.

⁷ Fieldworkers waited outside call centres and approached workers during break times and shift changes. None of the fieldwork team had worked previously in the ITES–BPO industry and none of the respondents were known to field agents previously.

⁸ Batt et al.'s (2005) study involved an on-site survey of 60 call centres in Bangalore, Bombay, Chennai, Delhi, Hyderabad and Kolkata, covering a total core workforce of 31,698.

⁵ Interview themes relevant to this paper include: agents' family backgrounds; training; employment histories; experiences of call centre work; career progression; and collectivisation preferences.

Table 2
Summary of respondent characteristics (May 2007 NCR survey).

	MNC captive (N = 181)		MNC third party (N = 106)		Indigenous third party (N = 183)		Domestic players (N = 42)		Total (N = 511)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
<i>Gender</i>										
Male	75	41	53	50	106	58	29	69	262	51
Female	106	59	53	50	77	42	13	31	249	49
<i>Education</i>										
Undergraduate degree held	169	93	83	78	139	76	24	57	414	81
Postgraduate degree held	21	12	10	9	20	11	2	5	52	10
<i>Contractual status</i>										
Permanent contract	148	82	98	92	164	90	38	90	447	87
Temporary contract	33	18	8	8	17	10	4	10	64	13
<i>Nature of current work*</i>										
Combined call centre/BPO work	41	22	8	8	28	15	5	12	82	16
Call centre work only	110	61	75	71	139	76	34	81	358	70
BPO work only	30	17	23	22	16	9	3	7	72	14
Inbound calls (sales, technical support, customer service)	146	81	90	85	108	59	12	29	352	69
Outbound calls (telemarketing, sales)	35	19	16	15	75	41	30	71	159	31
Night shifts	123	70	54	51	103	56	10	24	289	57
	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean	N	Mean
Age (years)	181	25.0	106	24.1	183	23.7	42	24.0	511	24.3
Monthly hours worked**	166	190.3	86	201.2	149	192.6	34	186.8	434	191.7
Daily commute to and from work combined (min)	181	77.5	106	70.3	183	71.8	42	61.2	511	72.5

Note: data refer to workers' current position at time of survey, or else last held job (for ex-ITES–BPO workers). As far as possible, labels mimic those in Taylor et al. (2008, pp. 38–40)) to enable cross-comparison.

* Or else for ex-workers, most recent ITES–BPO job.

** Based on a restricted sample range (85%) who provided calculable responses.

Overall, 86% of respondents in the survey were engaged in call centre work or a mix of call centre work with 'back office' work. Given our focus in this paper on call centre workers specifically; the 72 workers engaged only in non-customer-facing back office work are excluded from subsequent calculations.

5. From Global North to Global South: the need for different forms of call centre organising

While labour unions in the UK have had some success in organising call centre workers, this success has not been replicated by established labour unions in India. Because India represents an emergent call centre location relative to the UK, our analysis begins with a short exploration of labour organising in UK call centres during its emergent phase in the 1990s. At this time, there emerged a widespread union presence in UK captive call centres based on the transfer of established collective bargaining arrangements from other parts of existing companies to their new in-house call centre operations (IDS, 1997). Call centres in the financial services industry offered a promising sector for new recruitment on this basis, based on an unusually high level of inter-union cooperation (Taylor and Bain 1999, p. 113; Bain and Taylor, 2002). The telecommunications and travel industries offered similarly important organising possibilities. Indeed, by the end of the 1990s, as many as two thirds of UK call centre workers were employed in companies with union recognition (IDS 2002; IRS 2001)⁹. During the 1990s unions successfully negotiated on standard bargaining items in UK call centres around pay, holidays, hours, shifts, and overtime premiums. Unions also raised concerns over employee monitoring, the need for increased job diversity; and increased use of team working to offset problems of worker isolation

⁹ However, these figures are potentially distorted by a low survey response rate from large non-union firms and smaller firms (Bain, 2003). Additionally, the UK's third party call centre sub-sector remains difficult territory for labour unions.

(Richardson et al., 2000). More recently, some unions recruited large numbers of new workers from third-party call centres with no previous union history. The best known case here is Excell Multimedia in Glasgow, where despite significant employer hostility, the CWU recruited a substantial membership around workers' dissatisfaction with a highly regimented labour process, unachievable targets, and company malpractice over 999 service provision (Taylor and Bain, 2003).

These union successes have not been replicated in India (see also Ofreneo et al., 2007; Sandhu, 2006; Sarkar, 2007)¹⁰. The main trade union centres in India are the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) and Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS). With the exception of HMS, all have close affiliations with mainstream political parties, and this has shaped their various responses to the ITES–BPO industry. Thus, while INTUC (linked with the Congress party which heads the ruling national United Progressive Alliance coalition) supports the sector as a sunrise industry, the left-affiliated unions (CITU and AITUC) have highlighted exploitative working conditions in the industry, through interventions in the Indian national policy debate. The AITUC in particular has called for Indian unions to look at job security, social security protection and time schedules within the ITES–BPO industry (Sinha, 2004). However, beyond several press statements on worker exploitation in Indian call centres, our research has yet to reveal any significant organisation of workers in the ITES–BPO industry by AITUC and CITU.

¹⁰ These organising difficulties must also be understood in the context of broader challenges to the Indian labour movement over the last two decades, in terms of a post-1980s liberalisation of the economy, associated public sector restructuring, and increasing adoption of a 'market logic' (Roychowdhury, 2003; Bagchi, 1995). From 1985–1995 India's union membership as a percentage of formal sector workers declined from 26.5% to 22.8% (Bhattacharjee, 2003).

So how to explain this paradox? Part of the problem is, that in contrast to the UK where unions were able to extend existing collective bargaining agreements to firms' new in-house call centre operations (particularly in financial services, telecommunications and travel), there was no such comparable pre-existing union presence in India. However, we argue that also in contrast to the UK, call centre work and employment is experienced and perceived very differently in India, thereby posing an alternative set of challenges for organising. Our evidence suggests that the desire for – and meaning of – representation amongst call centre 'professionals' in India significantly differs from that documented in the UK. We focus here on two dimensions of this geographical reconfiguration of call centre work and employment in the Indian context.

5.1. Employment and career opportunities in India's new service economy

One significant challenge to organising in India's ITES–BPO industry concerns the position of call centre employment vis-à-vis broader employment opportunities in post-liberalisation India. The average annual rate of growth of India's national income over the past two decades is 5.6% (Nayyar, 2006). While high by world standards, this growth has not been accompanied by an expansion of employment, which grew by only 1% p.a. in the mid to late 1990s. Indeed, employment growth actually slowed down over the decade 1993–2004 compared with 1983–1993 (Unni and Ravendran, 2007). Against this backdrop of 'jobless growth', India's ITES–BPO industry shines out with an impressive employment growth rate of 15% p.a. during 2003–2004 and 2005–2006 (Hay Group/Manpower India, 2006), outpacing national income growth and employment growth many times over. These figures underpin the celebration of the ITES–BPO industry by the Indian government and Nasscom, and widespread perceptions of call centres as increasingly significant employers in India's new economy that must be protected politically.

Indian call centre employment must also be understood in relation to *alternative* employment opportunities for young graduates. In the UK, call centre work is relatively low paid: new agents are paid an average of £14,000 annually (Contact Babel, 2008, p. 44), far less than the UK per capita income (£26,712 per annum) (World Bank, 2009). In India, call centre jobs are in fact very well paid relative to other employment opportunities. Our survey of call centre workers in India's National Capital Region found that the mean entry-level wage for agents to be Rs. 9 272 per month¹¹, consistent with a figure of Rs. 10, 087 per month for the 'typical call centre worker' as identified by Batt et al. (2005). While low by UK standards (£1 416 per annum), Rs. 9 272 per month is about 3 times the monthly Indian per capita income (Rs. 3200 per month) (World Bank, 2009), and twice the earnings of an entry-level high school teacher, accountant, or entry-level marketing professional with a graduate degree (UPI, 2005). Moreover, based on the World Bank's 2005 Purchasing Power Parity (PPP) figures¹² (US = 1, India = 14.67, UK = 0.65) the mean entry-level wage for an Indian call centre agent equates to UK pay of £31,800 PPP per annum. These pay levels powerfully shape how young graduates perceive call centre jobs and the purchasing power they offer in India's new service economy:

'I don't think there is any other industry which is providing you salaries in 8000, 10,000, 12,000 [Rs. per month] in such a

big amount on just your basic high school 12 qualification, or after graduation also' (Male agent, fresher, Delhi).

'The last six years, it's just brought about a revolution. A lot of middle-class people, plain graduates who earlier wouldn't have had a job are now working in the BPO industry and doing very well – earning a lot more than what they could have with their qualifications outside the BPO industry' (Female agent, 5 years experience, Noida).

Thus in our survey, 'good starting salary' was the most highly ranked motivation for joining India's ITES–BPO industry amongst the fresher cohort ($N = 83$), and all worker cohorts combined ($N = 439$)¹³. Research participants explained that the physical work environment of call centres sets them apart because they provide clean air conditioned offices and Western work environments that contrast with the realities of work outside these buildings (also Mirchandani, 2003, p. 13). Of the 55 call centre employers documented in our survey, 78% provide in-house restaurants and door-to-door taxis to and from work, 73% provide stress counselors, 65% diet counselors, 80% banking facilities, 74% gym facilities, 53% shopping facilities, 78% games rooms, 76% employee sports teams, and 62% employer head-leased residential accommodation for workers. The availability of these workplace facilities further shapes young graduates' aspirations for call centre work vis-à-vis alternative employment opportunities:

'What the BPO industry is offering is much better than what you get outside the sector, especially in the informal sector but even in the formal sector: the working conditions, the working environment is much better... It remains one of the most attractive areas' (Male agent trainer, Noida).

In combination with issues of jobless growth and the relatively high purchasing power of entry-level call centre pay in India, these office work environments mean that the desire for – and meaning of – representation amongst call centre workers in India differs from that documented in the UK. Additionally, these problems are reinforced by significant opportunities for career progression within India's call centre 'industry'. While our survey documented limited prospects for *internal* promotion¹⁴, consistent with existing studies from the UK (Belt, 2002) and India (Batt et al., 2005), our survey also indicates considerable scope for agents to gain upward mobility by moving *laterally* between firms: staying at the same point in the employment hierarchy, but moving to another call centre and negotiating a pay increase. Our results indicate that these inter-firm 'career staircases' (Benner et al., 2007) are premised on an acute call centre *skills* shortage within the Indian context. Crucially, formal English qualifications are not necessarily indicative of proficiency in English *communication* or 'soft' skills required by employers. Thus, as new applicants filter through the various recruitment rounds of screening, testing and training, only 1 in 10 secure a call centre job (Fig. 1).

The outcome of this talent crunch is relatively high levels of individual bargaining power amongst successful Indian call centre workers once they have trained and gained experience 'on the floor'. In response to constrained internal job ladders, many workers vote with their feet. While UK call centres currently exhibit mean average agent attrition rates of 28% (Contact Babel, 2008, p. 60), equivalent rates in India are 60% for voice-based ITES–BPO workers (Hay Group/Manpower India, 2006). Our survey indicates

¹¹ Entry-level wages also vary by employer type: Captives Rs. 10,943 per month. MNC Third Parties Rs. 8043 per month. Indian Third parties Rs. 8796 per month. Domestic Rs. 7272 per month.

¹² In using PPP figures to understand the value of Indian call centre wages, the authors emulate a method presented by Benner (2007) on call centre wages in South Africa.

¹³ The survey sample was stratified: 18% freshers (less than 1 year's experience); 18% early career (1–2 years); 33% mid-career (2–4 years experience); 15% over 4 years experience; and 15% ex-call centre workers (left the sector no earlier than 2004).

¹⁴ Only 10% of call centre workers ($N = 439$) had been promoted within their current company.

(Source: Hay Group / Manpower India 2006)

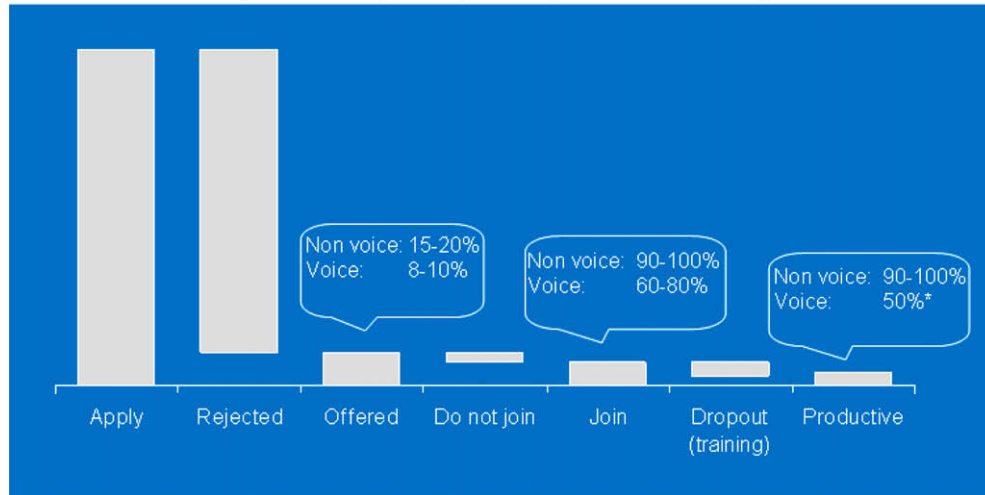


Fig. 1. Understanding the skills shortage in India's ITES–BPO industry: rejection rates of applicants at different stages of the recruitment and training process.

Table 3

Measuring attrition in call centre work teams in India's National Capital Region (survey evidence).

Measure of attrition:	MNC captive (N = 117)	MNC third party (N = 74)	Indigenous third party (N = 146)	Domestic players (N = 32)	Total (N = 369)
% Work team departed in past week (mean)	3.1	3.0	2.7	2.9	2.9
% Work team departed in last month (mean)	7.6	4.1	7.1	6.0	6.5
% Work team departed last 3 months (mean)	13.0	11.5	15.1	13.2	13.6
Estimated annual attrition rates for these work teams	52.0	46.0	60.4	52.8	54.4
Mean ave work team size	22	22	23	23	23

Note: N numbers indicate total respondents minus non-voice agents and ex-workers for each current employer type.

that annual rates of attrition within respondents' work teams average 54%; attrition is highest in Indian third parties (Table 3).

Previous surveys in India suggest that of the agents who leave, 85% move to competing call centres (Anant et al., 2005). Our survey documented a figure of 95%¹⁵, as well as the pay increases that result from this mobility. For example, within 1 year almost one third of the freshers have moved to a second employer, thereby increasing their average income to Rs. 12 644 per month (£43,368 PPP p.a.). For mid career agents (3–4 years experience), three quarters have moved to a second call centre employer, with one third also having moved again to a third call centre employer, thereby increasing their average monthly income to Rs. 15 433 (£52,934 PPP p.a.)¹⁶. In this way, opportunities for inter-firm career progression in India's tight ITES–BPO labour market act to empower proficient workers in pursuit of better terms of work and employment. While some firms have responded with non-compete agreements, these are difficult to enforce¹⁷. This worker mobility poses major challenges to traditional workplace organising and representation.

5.2. Different socio-culturally constructed meanings of call centre 'work', 'workers' and 'unions'

A second dimension of India's call centres which poses challenges to organising concerns the ways in which commonly ac-

cepted meanings of offshored call centre 'work', 'workers' and 'unions' are reconstructed in India vis-à-vis the UK. While recent studies have rightly stressed the diversity of different forms of call centre work¹⁸, in the UK there remains a significant public perception of call centre jobs as low status, poorly paid and with few career prospects¹⁹, not least amongst university graduates concerned to secure professional employment. In contrast, call centre jobs in India are perceived as desirable, skilled and high-status professional service occupations (Mirchandani, 2003, p. 13; Noronha and d'Cruz, 2006; Cohen and El-Sawad, 2007). Strikingly, 79% of respondents in our survey are university graduates. Further undermining notions of Indian call centre work as 'dead-end', the survey results (N = 439) show that after 'good starting salary', the next most important motivations for respondents choosing call centre jobs were 'to gain international business experience' and 'as a long-term career'. In addition to the attractive pay levels already discussed, sociocultural constructions of Indian call centre work as 'professional' are rooted in the kinds of rhetoric, images, and terminology used to describe call centre 'work' and 'workers' in the recruitment adverts (Fig. 2) which dominate the weekly jobs pages in India's national daily English language newspapers.

Previous studies suggest that call centre employers in India deliberately inculcate organisational discourses of professionalism as marketing devices to customers and to persuade employees to

¹⁵ Survey participants were asked to name the destinations of colleagues who had left their work teams in the last week, month and three months.

¹⁶ These career mobility pathways are discussed in a separate paper.

¹⁷ Within this context, some firms are developing 'codes of conduct' to restrict labour poaching: IBM Daksh eServices and Wipro Spectramind have already made an agreement in this regard (see Budhwar, 2009, p. 152).

¹⁸ 'Call centres' are far from a unitary category, as a function of variations in call centre type, sector, complexity, type of workflow, and market segment (Frenkel et al., 1999; Kinnie et al., 2000; Batt and Moynihan, 2002; Houlihan, 2002; Taylor et al., 2002; Korczynski, 2002; Glucksmann, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2007).

¹⁹ Deery and Kinnie (2002, p. 4) provide a useful summary of empirical studies that support this image.

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Fig. 2. constructing call centre work as an international service profession: typical job ads in the Indian national press.

perform and behave in ways which the organisation deems to be appropriate, effective and efficient (d'Cruz and Noronha, 2006; Evetts, 2003). Underpinning the (re)construction of such corporate cultures, our survey highlighted an impressive range of professional titles to identify entry-level agents, including 'customer care executive', 'customer support associate', 'customer service representative', 'operation executive', 'customer care officer', and 'customer process associate'. Combined with the kinds of office environments and facilities detailed above, the message to employees is clear: you are not blue-collar²⁰.

Further reinforcing these differential constructions of call centre work, newly hired Indian agents undergo more prolonged periods of training than in the UK. UK call centre workers receive an average of 15 days induction training focused primarily on product knowledge, use of database systems, and customer care (Contact Babel, 2008, p. 75–80). Our survey documented that entry-level agents received an average 25 days training before hitting the floor. Interviews with call centre agents and training providers also highlighted an expanded training remit that goes beyond knowledge of process and product to include immersion in Western popular culture, voice and accent training, time management techniques, selling skills, and assertiveness²¹. Table 4 shows that while culture and voice-and accent training are priorities in international-facing MNC captives, this is less relevant in domestic call centres where the dominant training focus is nature of process and communication skills.

²⁰ The professional status of ITES-BPO is further reinforced by its exemption from existing labour laws and standards which are deemed applicable only to 'blue collar' work (Thite and Russell, 2007).

²¹ These various forms of identity training have been the subject of documentaries, TV programmes, and films: e.g. 'Diverted to Delhi' (2002 documentary by ABC/Greg Stitt Productions, Melbourne); 'Office Tigers' (2006, BBC Storyville, directed by Liz Mermin); 'Hello/One Night at the Call Center' (2007 film directed by Atul Agnihotri); and 'John and Jane' (2006 film by Ashim Ahluwalia/HBO).

Research participants were also keen to stress the *transferability* of the professional training that they received in terms of English language, communication skills, cultural understanding of Western people and consumer markets, multi-tasking, and time management to other sectors. In our survey, ex-call centre workers ($N = 77$) were asked to rank the most important transferable skills they gained from working in India's ITES-BPO sector: experience of an international business environment scored highest, time management second, and multi-tasking and improved communication skills scored third. These skills were also identified at interview:

'Everybody should work in a BPO for one or two years, absolutely! ...so that they can broaden. It helps you immensely. It gives you flexibility of work, allows you to work with different kinds of people... a lot of learning ... patience with work, a lot of time management skills, and most of it I can apply to my new company here also.' (Ex-call centre language trainer, Delhi).

Consistent with these claims, our survey identified a wide range of sectoral destinations of former call centre workers, including the airline sector, banking, insurance, hotel and Information Technology, hospitality, education, logistics, marketing, real estate, retail, telecommunications, travel, textiles and media. This range of destinations for Indian workers contrasts with a popular discourse in the UK that 'when workers leave a call centre they are only qualified to work in another call centre' (e.g. Morgan-Williams, 1998).

The point is that in contrast to the UK, the self-identification of India's call centre workers as white-collar professionals (see also Russell and Thite, 2008) with transferable skill-sets presents significant challenges to labour organising in this sector. Additionally, commonly accepted understandings of the very meaning of the 'union' label are very different in India from the UK. This divergence can be understood in terms of the cultural associations surrounding the historical development of India's trade unions: specifically their strong institutional ties to India's formal political parties in

Table 4

Call centre workers rank the top 2 types of post-recruitment training received (in terms of total time allocated) in their first call centre job (survey evidence).

Training type	MNC captive (N = 161)		Indigenous third party (N = 119)		Domestic players (N = 84)	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
Nature of process	38	31	36	25	30	19
Customer service	27	30	20	13	6	13
Communication skills	22	33	15	24	13	20
Voice and accent	25	36	12	31	12	17
Culture	43	20	31	21	23	10
Keyboard skills	5	10	4	5	0	4
Numeracy	1	0	1	0	0	0
Ave total duration of training (days)	25		24		25	

Note: N numbers refer to respondents' first call centre employers, entry-level call centre positions only. Table 4 excludes rankings for MNC third parties because of too few calculable responses.

which the latter invariably dominate the relationship, prompting significant worker skepticism around whose interests are really being served (e.g. Venkataratnam, 1993; Bhattacharjee, 1999). Moreover, Indian unions are fragmented, competing in many workplaces for the loyalty of the same body of workers, rivalries which are often bitter and sometimes violent (ILO, 1992; Venkataratnam, 2001). Significantly, 75% of call centre workers in our survey agreed with the statement that 'labour unions will significantly damage the competitiveness of India's ITES-BPO sector', anxieties which stem partly from this wider middle-class perception of India's labour unions, often reinforced by memories of parents' negative experiences of these institutions. Herein lies a second set of factors that helps explain why the desire for – and meaning of – unionisation amongst call centre workers in India differs from that documented in the UK, prompting the search for an alternative organising model.

6. Towards an alternative occupational organising model for India's call centres?

While previous studies have identified a clear need to organise India's call centres, there exist significant geographical constraints on traditional forms of union representation in call centres in the Indian context relative to the UK. But while India's established labour unions have yet to organise the ITES-BPO industry, one newly emergent labour organisation *has* begun successfully to recruit call centre workers and effectively represent their interests (around issues of employment insecurity, supervisory monitoring, unrealistic targets, social isolation, and health and safety problems as documented in Section 3). Drawing on interview material and secondary data collected during 2006–2008 (Table 1) this section outlines key features in the establishment and early outcomes of UNITES Pro; key tenets of its alternative organising model; and, its potential to replicate the kinds of organising successes seen amongst UK call centre workers.

UNITES Pro began as the Centre for BPO Professionals (CBPOP) in 2004, and was later formalised as the Union for ITES Professionals in September 2005 in Mumbai (see Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009 for a detailed history). At the time of writing, organisers claimed a national membership of 7000 across 150 different companies, with chapters in Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, and Kochin. UNITES Pro's concerns are to represent and defend the interests of young call centre workers; improve working conditions in India's BPO-ITES industry; defend the healthy and safety of call centre workers; fight against youth discrimination within the workplace; and enable call centre workers to meet peers with similar problems and demands. An additional concern is to enhance the employment prospects of agents through 'portable career' services, including interview training, career workshops, and advice

on individual contract negotiation. UNITES Pro also maintains a research and knowledge dissemination function to provide workers with individualised and up-to-date support as their careers develop. Also, rather than restrict its focus to issues of production, UNITES Pro's organising concerns span the work-home boundary to encompass workers' families and broader communities, with links fostered with youth organisations, women's networks, and schools. Activities are typically designed to appeal to young workers in their 20s who form the bulk of call centre agents, many of whom are turned off by the prospect of an afterwork 'union' meeting:

'They say 'we don't have time for anything', so how can we target this? We don't have union meetings, we have social get togethers, events, and help related session groups, so that is the main reason we are attracting [call centre workers].' (Female UNITES Pro organiser and agent, 4 years experience).

Organisers have therefore developed a range of social activities to appeal to busy call centre agents such as spirituality and 'art of living' programme, Christmas parties, meals, sports events, sessions with psychologists, and blood donation sessions.

UNITES Pro appeals to young workers by means of an energetic band of highly committed activists, and the generation of sympathetic media publicity around high profile events in an often ad hoc and opportunistic manner. One of the defining events in its establishment and growth concerns the rape and murder of Pratibha Srikanth Murthy, a female call centre agent employed by Hewlett Packard Globalsoft Services in Bangalore by a driver claiming to have been dispatched on behalf of her employer (The Hindu, 2005; The Times of India, 2005b; Taylor and Bain, 2008). In response, UNITES Pro organised protests, publicised the broader health and safety concerns surrounding call centre night working, and pushed for stricter regulation of taxi drivers. UNITES Pro has also represented call centre agents in cases of harassment and denial of salaries to workers at BelAir (November 2006), as well as ex-call centre workers at HCL denied experience letters and final salaries. Additionally, UNITES Pro is pushing employers to sign up to UNI's global call centre charter (UNI, 2006) to ensure fairer working conditions for Indian call centre workers, particularly: performance targets based on quality of customer interaction rather than solely on quantity of calls made, 40 h maximum work weeks with regular rest breaks, improved training in portable skills, more active employee participation in corporate decision-making, paid cover for leave and other absences, protection from abusive customers, and monitoring only when employees are aware.

The broader significance of UNITES Pro, therefore, is that it has begun to organise Indian call centre workers while India's established trade unions – with their traditional focus on wage bargaining and basic working conditions – have not. It has done so by developing an alternative organising agenda and innovative

Table 5
Employer-provided facilities provided for resolving workers' grievances (survey evidence).

Facilities for resolving employee grievances available to call centre workers in their current company (or by last call centre employer for ex-workers)	MNC captive (N = 150)		MNC third party (N = 83)		Indigenous third party (N = 167)		Domestic players (N = 39)		Total (N = 439)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Team meetings	148	99	80	96	155	93	39	100	421	96
Individual performance review	95	63	52	63	99	59	38	97	273	62
One on one meetings with team leader	108	72	68	82	114	68	31	79	321	73
One on one meetings with senior manager	66	44	40	48	74	44	14	36	194	44
Online discussion forum	21	14	10	12	13	8	3	8	47	11

strategies which are better positioned to confront the new realities of work and employment in India's new service economy. The key elements of their organising model – and its divergence from India's mainstream labour movement – are: a rejection of any direct affiliation with India's formal political parties; an explicit appeal to skilled white-collar info-service 'professionals' rather than low paid blue-collar 'workers'; an integration of productive concerns at the level of the workplace with social reproductive concerns across the work-home boundary; an occupation-specific organising focus; provision of education and training opportunities to help workers pursue upward mobility through inter-firm career ladders; dissemination of information on job opportunities; combined service and advocacy functions; and lobbying for industry-wide certification of 'soft' skills to improve workers' negotiating position in the labour market.

That said, there are other elements in the development of UNITES Pro's organising model which are problematic. With the majority of its current membership concentrated in the domestic sector (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 39), UNITES Pro has recently signed its first collective bargaining agreements with four small/medium-sized domestic call centres in Chennai (Excel Outsourcing, May 2006), Kerala (e-Merge Business Processing, November 2006), and Bangalore (Infopoint and Transact Solutions, both April 2007). Recent studies have rightly recognised that 'issues and methods relevant to working conditions in the Global North cannot be mechanically transplanted to India, because of national differences and local particularities' (Taylor and Bain, 2008, p. 148; see also Taylor et al., 2009, p. 20). Nevertheless these studies have also advocated reciprocal delegations and meetings with UK trade unionists (*ibid.*: p. 150), and the extension of collective bargaining agreements to India (Taylor et al., 2008, p. 46) in order for UNITES Pro to replicate the organising successes of UK trade unions in UK call centres. In short, they recommend that UNITES Pro's 'future success depends on its ability to straddle the contradictions between providing a network for BPO professionals, acting like a conventional trade union in the making and developing forms of community-unionism' (Taylor and Bain, 2008, p. 149).

The analysis in this paper suggests that emulating a UK-inspired workplace collective bargaining strategy, or becoming 'a conventional trade union' is not the most effective, or geographically appropriate, form of labour organising for call centre workers in India, as evidenced through our work in India's National Capital Region. Problematically, the very models of UK workplace collective bargaining to which scholars appeal themselves 'at times constitute a hollow shell' (Hyman, 1997, p. 318) in which agreements are increasingly dominated by employers with no independent consultation with workers nor representation of their interests (see Millward et al., 2000, p. 138–83). Moreover, the basic desire for collective representation amongst Indian call centre workers differs from that documented amongst organised call centre workers in the UK. Simply put, while previous analyses have correctly diagnosed the problem (the need for labour organising in India's

ITES–BPO industry) they have potentially misdiagnosed the solution (UK-inspired workplace collective bargaining).

We argue, therefore, that as UNITES Pro seeks to expand its membership to call centre 'professionals' in the higher-end international-facing captive call centres, it needs to de-emphasise workplace collective bargaining and instead recognise and build on its – arguably greater – similarities with new forms of cross-firm occupational labour organising documented amongst professional-technical service workers in the Global North that also seek to organise mobile workers tied more by their similar social and educational backgrounds, skills, career aspirations and labour market mobility experiences rather than by any commitment to their current employer (see also Cohen et al., 2009). For example, the emerging responses of organisations such as Washtech to challenges of converting new members into full fee-paying members or of convincing young, university educated, white-collar workers of the relevance of collectivisation to their own situation (see van Jaarsveld, 2004), will be important for UNITES Pro to learn from as organisers grapple with similar issues.

Of course, UNITES Pro also faces obstacles specific to the Indian ITES–BPO context, including recruitment difficulties due to firms' in-house taxi services with their tight turnaround times; high levels of corporate security at worksites; and the residential dispersal of call centre workers. Additionally, subtly nuanced negative (and not so negative) experiences of call centre workers as a function of variations in call centre type (captive/third party; international/domestic), complexity, type of workflow (inbound/outbound), and market segment mean that not all of India's call centre workers are equally amenable to organising. Organisers therefore must target carefully their organising activities to the needs of specific worker cohorts for whom particular issues are most acutely felt²². Indian agents also described how employers 'substitute' the triggers to collective organising by providing mechanisms for resolving employee grievances (Table 5). These substitution mechanisms also include facilities such as gyms, yoga lessons, company sponsored sports teams, diet counselors, and door-to-door air conditioned taxis detailed earlier (c.f. Budhwar, 2009; Budhwar et al., 2009). The aim is to match or exceed the services that UNITES Pro is offering to workers (and without membership dues). However, such corporate responses are contingent on maintaining high profitability, and therefore are liable to withdrawal when profit rates dip. Simultaneously, these employer-provided facilities do not necessarily constitute an acceptance of the need to recognise and protect call centre worker rights (see also Kayser, 2004). As such, the credibility of UNITES Pro will rest on its ability to promote a rights-based agenda in their negotiations with employers, along with the persistence of serious issues of collective call centre worker injustice around which to mobilise.

²² For example, employment insecurity for sales agents in outbound call centres; or social isolation amongst night workers in international-facing call centres.

Finally, we argue that while workplace collective bargaining is highly problematic in a burgeoning ITES–BPO industry characterised by an acute skills shortage and hyper-mobility of workers, this is not to deny its future possibilities in the context of a potential downturn in India's service economy, as a consequence of global economic recession. But even then, what we understand as 'collective bargaining' in UK call centres will be different from collective bargaining in the Indian ITES–BPO context as a function of different organising tactics, a different agenda, and a different set of organising constraints. Thus, in contrast to the adversarial nature of collective bargaining in the UK we argue that UNITES Pro need to develop explicitly 'neo-corporatist' agendas to pursue mutually beneficial solutions for workers, firms and other industry and government institutions. The point is that 'employers do not object to employee involvement with professional associations but they may be extreme in their opposition to unionisation' (Noronha and D'Cruz, 2009, 225; see also Hurd, 2000). Indeed, there are indications that UNITES Pro is beginning to develop such neo-corporatist strategies. In December 2008, UNITES Pro national representatives met with the Nasscom Vice President, Raju Bhatnagar, to discuss their apprehensions over large-scale layoffs in the industry (The Economic Times, 2008b). UNITES Pro emphasised the transferable skills agenda, arguing that agents at risk of being laid-off from call centres should be redeployed in other expanding sectors, such as biotechnology and pharmaceutical research (The Hindustan Times, 2008). Nasscom accepts that a slowdown may be likely, but deny any significant job losses at the time of writing. Another area of convergence concerns improved training, certification and accreditation of workers in light of the ongoing skills shortage in India's ITES–BPO industry²³. Likewise, by improving work and employment conditions for existing agents through adherence to the UNI call centre charter, firms might begin to reduce rapidly rising costs of attrition, identified by Nasscom as the biggest issue facing the industry. Recent research by The Hay Group with Manpower India estimates costs of attrition (as a percentage of firms' annual operating expenditures) as highest for voice-based processes at 27% (c.f. 13% for non-voice-based processes). Accordingly, UNITES Pro's benchmarking of agent salaries should be promoted on the win–win premise that it will: *provide workers* with better insight into pay levels across employers; *help employers* to determine the pay levels needed to attract and retain competent employees; and *provide labour activists* with a stronger negotiating tool.

7. Conclusion

The transformations of work and employment accompanying the transition to the new economy present major challenges to traditional union models. Encouragingly, studies have documented the emergence of labour organisations targeting mobile white-collar information-service workers through new forms of cross-firm 'occupational unionism'. Yet, despite similar (and different) challenges to the labour movement in the Global South, new forms of labour organising in these 'other' locations remain significantly under-researched, limiting our understanding of the role of geographical context in shaping possibilities for organising service workers in the 'same jobs' at different ends of global service chains. In response, this paper has explored the lived experiences and aspirational social constructions of call centre work and employment in India's ITES–BPO industry; the ways in which they differ from those previously documented amongst call centre workers in the

UK; and the consequences of that geographical reconfiguration of offshored call centre work for the (non)replicability in India of workplace collective bargaining strategies and tactics successfully developed in some UK call centres. The rise of UNITES Pro can be understood more broadly as an *alternative* occupational organising model that is better positioned to confront the new realities of work and employment in India's new service economy than are India's established labour unions. How far its innovative methods and strategies are transferable to other growth sectors of India's new service economy (e.g. airlines, hospitality, financial services) is an important question for future research.

This research might also be developed in other ways. First, given the young age of UNITES Pro, longitudinal analyses need to explore how its innovative organising strategies evolve over time, and in relation to new obstacles – for example, more systematic anti-unionism efforts being developed by 'union-busting' firms which in tandem with their MNC clients have also offshored to India. Second, research needs to document the activities of other labour market intermediaries (or LMIs) in India's ITES–BPO sector which also broker employment relationships and mediate worker mobility, including: voice trainers, culture trainers, temporary employment agencies, permanent placement agencies. And finally, there is a need for comparative analyses of the Indian experience with other emerging call centre offshoring destinations, specifically South Korea, the Philippines, South Africa, and China. The point is that while analyses of English-speaking workers in offshored services offer new insights into contemporary economic geographies of the Global South, extending this focus to workers whose daily customer interactions are *not* in English is potentially more radical (and difficult). Much remains to be done.

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²³ To this end, Nasscom's eKaliber initiative aims to restructure the Indian educational system to accredit students in call centre skills and to enhance workers' employability in other sectors.

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