

THE CHANGING ROLES OF TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA: A CASE STUDY OF NATIONAL THERMAL POWER CORPORATION (NTPC), UNCHAHAR

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ABSTRACT

Trade unions are a major component of the system of modern industrial relations in any nation, each having, in their constitution, their own set of objectives or goals to achieve. Change in the political, social and educational environment has seen them rechristened as a forum that protects and furthers workers' interests and improves the quality of life of workers, enlarging their traditional roles of establishing terms and conditions of employment. This paper focuses on plant level trade unions, particularly those of the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) Unchahar plant, one of the largest and best Public Sector Undertakings of India. This exploratory study of the different trade unions operational at the Unchahar plant will also highlight their ideologies, objectives and structures. We aim to capture the changing paradigms in the roles of plant-level unions: from maintaining good industrial relations, once considered their primary role, they now work actively to improve the quality of life of workers, a role earlier considered to be secondary.

Keywords: trade union, National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), employee welfare, unionisation, Quality of Work Life (QWL)

INTRODUCTION

Trade unions are a major component of the system of modern industrial relations in any nation, each having their own set of objectives or goals to achieve according to their constitution and each having its own strategy to reach those goals. A trade union is an organisation formed by workers to protect their interests and improve their working conditions, among other goals. It is a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving working conditions (Dankert, 1948). In developing countries, the right to form a union and bargain collectively protects workers from exploitative and abusive conditions at work and puts pressure on employers to share productivity gains with their employees. Protection of basic worker and human rights in

developing nations thus necessitates unionisation so that the working population can reap the benefits of economic growth (Ghosh & Geetika, 2007).

Historically, union representation and collective bargaining have been the keys to the growth of a stable working population in developed economies, and have made it possible for workers to gain a more equitable share of the wealth that they create; they are also able to improve working conditions and help workers gain job security. Changes in the political, social and educational environments regarding awareness of rights – such as the right to organise, the right to bargain, and the right to settle terms and conditions of employment – have caused worker unions to spring up to protect and further workers' interests. Thus, with the establishment of minimum wages, norms for mandatory work hours, provisions for health and safety, and overall improvements in working conditions, unionisation has become instrumental in improving the quality of life of workers (Ghosh & Geetika, 2007).

Studies suggest numerous reasons behind the emergence of labour movement. According to Tannenbaum (1921), the machine is the cause and labour movement is the result. Hoxie (1921) believes that trade unions appeared as a group expression of the social situation in which workers found themselves and as remedial programmes with particular aims, policies and methods. Perlman (1928) believes that trade unionism arose from job consciousness and scarcity of job opportunities. Trade union growth, defined as the rate of change in union membership, is influenced by a host of factors, including cultural, economic, historical, political, and social conditions. Research by Kumar and Dow (1986), Elsheikh and Bain (1979), and Ashenfelter and Pencavel (1969) compare the key determinants affecting union membership variations over time; Elsheikh and Bain (1980) and Maki (1982) compare such variations across states or provinces, while Kochan (1979) and Lee (1978) focus on variations across individual workers.

FUNCTIONS AND ROLES OF TRADE UNIONS: CHANGING PATTERNS

Trade unions are a legitimate system for organising workers to voice their rights and grievances. Without unions, companies would become either too paternalistic or too dictatorial (Thomas, 2005). Responsible unions play an important role in maintaining cordial relations between management and labour. The aims and objectives of the major trade unions in India are seen to vary according to their political ideologies (Ratnam, 2006). For instance, some unions are influenced by Leftist principles aimed at overhauling the capitalist mode of production as a whole. However, irrespective of trade unions' political affiliations, their generic functions may be categorised as follows:

Primary Functions

The primary function of a trade union is to promote and protect the interest of its members (Perlman, 1928; Hoxie, 1921). This can be summarised as follows:

- i. To improve working and living conditions and to represent workers' interests in various fora (Freeman & Medoff, 1984).
- ii. To offer responsive cooperation in improving levels of production and productivity, discipline, and high standards of quality.
- iii. To secure fair wages for workers. Madheswaran and Shanmugam (2003) have analysed the impact of trade unions on wages by estimating the union-non-union wage differential using a single wage equation, treating unionism as a dummy. They estimate that workers within the union sector earn 19% more than the workers in the non-union sector.
- iv. To enlarge opportunities for promotion and training.
- v. To promote identity of workers' interests with their industries.
- vi. To cooperate in and facilitate technological advancement by broadening workers' understanding of underlying issues.

Value Addition and New Functions

Rapid changes in technology and successive revisions in pay have undoubtedly improved workers' conditions within the organised sector but mostly at the cost of loss of control over jobs (Ratnam, 2006). Such structural changes among the working population, along with economic growth and a sustained increase in capital intensity in both the product and labour markets (Jose, 1999), have necessitated a paradigm shift in the roles of trade unions: from predominantly bargaining institutions, they have become specialised, representing the voice and interests of labour. Ranganathan (2004) attempted to understand the dynamics of the trade union movement in public sector units (PSUs) when measured against economic reforms in India. According to him, in the post-economic reforms era, the enhanced penetration of media has caused workers to become better informed and increasingly aware of economic issues in their respective industries. As a result, management has also become more sensitive and skilled in handling relationships with employees, even in family-owned and-managed businesses (Thomas, 2005).

In addition to their traditional bargaining activities, unions now have a newly acquired voice and representative function. Many of them are trying to increase their value to workers by providing a variety of services to their members, as well

as to the community to which they belong. Such services range from providing legal and financial advice to improving skills.

These new functions of trade unions (also called ancillary functions [Monappa, 2000]) can be categorised into the following groups:

i. Communication

Many large unions publish a newsletter or a magazine, with the main aim of clarifying their policy or stance on certain principal issues, as well as to pass on information about their activities.

ii. Welfare activities

Many unions are engaged in a number of welfare activities, such as providing housing and organising cooperative societies to improve the quality of workers' lives. The Textile Labour Association (TLA), Ahmedabad, for example, has ventured to organise self-employed women (in the Self Employed Women's Association [SEWA]) and has even started banking activities for this purpose.

iii. Education

Education helps to make workers aware of their surrounding environments. Unions make efforts to launch educational programs for workers to enhance their knowledge of the work environment and to inform them about issues concerning them, particularly those regarding their rights and responsibilities and regarding procedures and systems that exist in the workplace for redressing grievances.

iv. Research

Union negotiators need updated information to be systematically collected and analysed at the bargaining table. They also need to backup their wage demands with knowledge of the industry, of productivity, and of comparative industry practices. Many unions conduct their own research to this effect, laying emphasis on practical problems, especially day-to-day affairs at work.

QUALITY OF WORK LIFE AND TRADE UNIONS

Quality of Work Life (QWL) is a broad umbrella term that covers a wide variety of programmes, techniques, and management styles through which organisations in general, and jobs in particular, are designed such that workers gain more

autonomy and authority at work. One factor among others that affect QWL is union-management relations (Sayeed & Sinha, 1981). Research on QWL reveals two types of influencing factors: organisationally driven and individually driven. Previous studies have linked job satisfaction with motivation and have ultimately extended this link to quality of work life. Organisationally driven factors include policies and procedures that deal with retaining employees, such as training and education, grievance handling, career advancement opportunities, monetary benefits, participative management, safety and security procedures, and welfare measures. Effective implementation of policies on these issues may lead to high degree of satisfaction, and may have a direct bearing on QWL. Several studies (Haque, 1992; Wadud, 1996; Hoque & Rahman, 1999) have revealed that QWL is important for job performance, job satisfaction, labour turnover, and labour management relations. Trade unions can play a proactive role in the design and implementation of proper policies on the abovementioned issues to contribute to better QWL. As Bhattacharjee (1999) observes, the union's collective voice provides management with information on workplace and shop-floor issues, acting thus as a communication channel. This leads to the development and retention of specific skills, improves worker morale, provides conditions to eliminate quitting, and enables the union to pressure management to act fairly and efficiently in its daily operations. The end result is augmented QWL, made possible by combining trade unions' traditional and new functions.

Individually driven factors generally include managerial style, delegation, communication and interpersonal relations, which are beyond the scope of this study and hence have not been considered.

Among several studies conducted in this area, one interesting study worth mentioning here is Joshi's (2007), which was designed to explore, in its entirety, the issue of representation of the legitimate interests of women workers. This study attempted to quantify union efforts to enhance QWL conditions, as perceived by four categories of women workers in Indian PSUs. The study revealed a positive perception among nurses concerning the role of their union in QWL conditions, as reflected in their positive assessment of their union for looking after their interests.

TRADE UNIONS IN INDIA

Trade unions in India are governed by the Trade Unions Act of 1926, which is the main legislation that provides various rules, regulations and controlling mechanisms related to trade unions.

The contribution of trade unions to the development of the labour movement in South Asia, as well as at the global level, is well recognised (Sinha, 2004). Attention has, however, remained focused on the formal sector. Unionisation is almost non-existent in the small and informal sector (<http://www.fessrilanka.org/fes/links/pdf/ACFU.pdf>). The union structure in India is rather well-developed despite the fact that only 20% of registered unions have sought affiliation to any of the other of the 13th Central Trade Union Organizations (CTUO). The extent of unionisation in the country is as high as 90% within the public sector, while, surprisingly, it is much lower in the private sector. The changing role of the government in India and the introduction of new technology have both radically altered the employment scenario. Shifts in job opportunities from the formal to the informal sector and increasing employment opportunities for educated and skilled workers have necessitated a paradigm shift in the approach and function of unions. Indian trade unions have, however, been slow in reacting to these changes. This, in turn, has resulted in the loss of membership within these unions (Sinha, 2004). Statistics related to labour, as released by the Government of India, indicate that the membership in unions that submitted returns to the appropriate authority under the Trade Union Act of 1926 was less than 2% of the total labour force in 1990, which, in turn, constituted about 30% of the organised sector workforce (<http://www.fessrilanka.org/fes/links/pdf/ACFU.pdf>). Workers have also been seen to move to alternate forms of trade unions.

The organisational pattern of a trade union federation is usually a three-tier structure, comprised of national-level federations, industry-level unions (e.g. Textile Labour Association, Ahmedabad) and unit-level unions, with independent local unions centred around a particular plant.

ROLE OF PLANT-LEVEL UNIONS

According to Calmfors, Driffill, Honkapohja and Giavazzi (1988), unions operating at the individual firm or plant level have very limited market power. Bezuidenhout (2000) notes that South Africa has developed a dual collective bargaining system, in which wages and work conditions are negotiated at the industry as well as at the plant level – the latter according to recognition agreements. Glendon and Booth (1982) have pointed out the active participation of plant-level unions in health, safety and welfare measures in Britain. In India, the history of plant-level unions dates back to the colonial period, when the entire labour movement was under the umbrella of the Indian National Congress. Unions were organised at the plant level, with regional and national affiliations with larger bodies, and their leaders came from the urban middle-class intelligentsia associated with the independence movement (Chaudhuri, 1996). Eventually, the Government of India initiated a plan for workers' participation in

industries at the shop level and at the plant level as a non-statutory measure in October 1975, to be implemented in undertakings employing more than 500 workers.

Changing trends in Indian trade unionism are evident from the emergence of independent and affiliated plant-level unions, which compete successfully with the recognised and rather ineffective affiliated unions to represent the workers at a particular plant. In the process, they are becoming more acceptable to workers as well as employers, who find their demands and patterns of negotiation more reasonable and better attuned to the existing situation in the organisation/enterprise (<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/01963.pdf>).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The last two decades have witnessed a number of changes in the global business environment in the form of redefined national boundaries, the emergence of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the changing world economic order, and so on. The changing pattern of the international division of labour is making its impact on the international labour market, and the bargaining power of trade unions in the capitalist world is capable of turning capitalist societies of wage earners into societies of partner nations (Hong, 1999). It has thus become necessary to study the impact of all these changes on the industrial relations of particular organisations. Keeping this in mind, this study considers the roles of trade unions in India in changing the business environment at a broad level, and specifically focuses on the functioning of plant-level trade unions. The organisation we will study is the Unchahar plant of NTPC, located in the State of Uttar Pradesh, India.

The objective of the paper is to capture the changing paradigms concerning the roles of plant-level unions, which have evolved from maintaining good industrial relations, once considered to be their primary role, to actively improving the quality of life of workers, a role considered earlier to be secondary. To be specific, our objective is to study the role of plant-level trade unions at NTPC in enhancing QWL.

This is an exploratory study of the different trade unions operational at the Unchahar plant, and also highlights their ideologies, objectives and structures. Inferences drawn in the study are made on the basis of structured interviews conducted with the chairpersons and members of the unions operating at the plant, as well as with the officers of different departments. Secondary sources of data include company manuals, annual reports, monthly newsletters and other

plant publications. We have did not use any statistical analysis in this report, as the data collected was essentially qualitative in nature.

NTPC: AN INTRODUCTION

NTPC Limited, a Public Sector Unit (PSU), and the largest power-generating company in India, was incorporated in 1975 to accelerate power development in the country. NTPC's core business is the engineering, construction and operation of power-generating plants. It also provides consultancy to companies in India and abroad in the areas of power plant construction and power generation. NTPC's share in the total installed capacity of the country on 31 March 2008 was 19.1%, and it contributed 28.50% of the total power generation of the country during 2007–2008. It has set new benchmarks for the power industry, in the areas of both power plant construction and operations. The Government of India has even identified NTPC as one of the 'Navratna' (which means 'nine jewels') companies of Indian public sector.

The backbone of NTPC is its human resource. NTPC believes in achieving organisational excellence through its human resources and follows a "People First" approach to leverage the potential of its 23,716 – strong workforce (as of 31 March 2008) to fulfill its business plans. It had figured among the top ten 'Best Companies to Work for in India' survey conducted by Mercer HR Consulting in 2004. It was also ranked the third-best employer for the second consecutive year in the 'Best Employers in India' survey by Hewitt Associates in 2005. In addition, it was adjudged the third-most great place to work by the Grow Talent Company in their 'Great Places to Work' study in 2004.

The HR function of NTPC has formulated an integrated strategy which rests on four building blocks of HR: Competence Building, Commitment Building, Culture Building and Systems Building. All HR initiatives are undertaken within this broad framework to actualise the company's vision of "enabling the employees to be a family of committed world class professionals making NTPC a learning organization". The bedrock of excellence of NTPC lies in its focused human resource development objectives, which can be summarised as follows:

1. To enhance organizational performance by institutionalising an objective and open performance management system.
2. To align individual and organizational needs and to develop business leaders by implementing a career development system.

3. To enhance the commitment of employees by recognising and rewarding high performance.
4. To build and sustain a learning organisation of competent world-class professionals.
5. To institutionalise core values and create a culture of team building, empowerment, equity, innovation and openness, which will motivate employees and enable the achievement of strategic objectives.

Industrial relations in NTPC are usually cordial and harmonious (<http://www.icmrindia.org>). Workshops for employee representatives are held at regular intervals at the national as well as regional levels, to sensitise them to opportunities, threats and challenges facing the company as it operates in an uncertain business environment. Workshops also reiterate employees' significant role in synergising the potential of human resources – the sole differentiating factor of competitive advantage in today's knowledge-based economy.

An overview of the organisation structure at the Unchahar Plant of NTPC is provided in Figure 1.

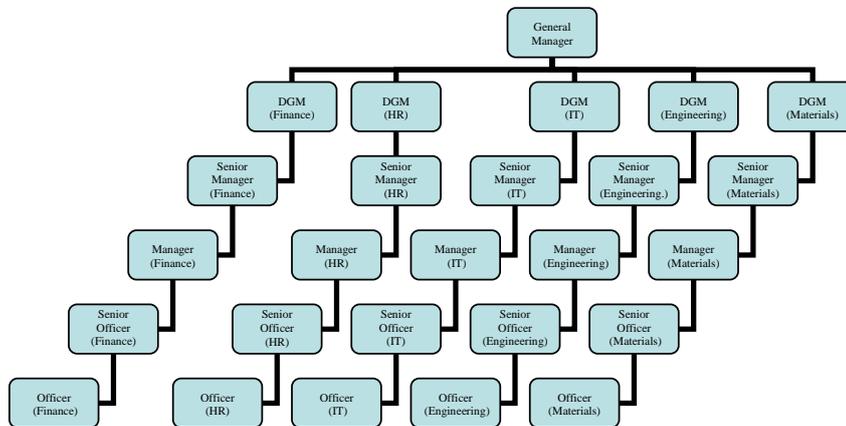


Figure 1. Organisational structure of Unchahar power plant.

TRADE UNIONS AT NTPC, UNCHAHAR

There are around 1200 employees at Unchahar Power Station (hereafter also referred to as the Plant or Power Station), of which 693 are of workman grade. Since a majority of workers is striving towards efficient and effective running of

the Plant, it has become essential to develop a healthy work environment through cordial relations between workers and management. Thus, the role of trade unions assumes critical significance in the success of the Power Station.

At the national level, union-management relations at NTPC are governed through the National Bipartite Committee (NBC), consisting of four CTUO nominees: the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), with representatives of unions from various projects' stations on one side, and management representatives on the other.

In the following sections we will touch upon the structure of the NBC and the functioning and other details of the major unions operational at the Plant.

National Bipartite Committee

The National Bipartite Committee was formed in December 1982. One representative from each of the CTUO, to which one or more of the participating unions may be affiliated, comprises the NBC. In 1987, a sub-committee of four Central Trade Unions (CTU) representatives and the position of Director were established. Later, the NBC was expanded to include stations/projects with one commissioned unit and having more than 500 workers, thus adding representatives from previously left-out stations/projects.

Long-term constitution of NBC

Briefly, the long-term pattern for the constitution of the NBC can be stated as:

- i. There will be only one representative union identified from each plant/station.
- ii. In any state where the government has the function of identifying a representative union, the union so identified will be the representative union for NTPC power station(s) located in that state. Examples include states like Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa.
- iii. For NTPC power stations situated in states other than the above, until the state government values/introduces a provision for identifying a representative union, the representative union will be identified through the process of a seat ballot, with the help of the state government in question. The union having largest number of votes will be taken as the representative.

- iv. Only unions with their membership open to all workmen will be allowed to contest for the representative union. Thus, no craft union or sectoral union will be eligible to be recognised as the representative union for the NBC.
- v. Only the representative union of such a plant/station that has at least one unit in commercial operation will be represented in the NBC.
- vi. The representative union, elected through secret ballot, of a power station with workmen numbering 500 or more will be allowed two seats in the NBC. Representative unions of stations with workmen numbering less than 500 and of corporate centres will be allowed one seat.
- vii. Only representatives from the workman category of the power stations in question will be eligible to be nominated to the NBC by the representative union.
- viii. Reconstitution on the basis of the above pattern will be done within a year, on signing the ensuing wage revision agreement.

Representation of CTUO

Each of the CTUO recognised by the Government of India at the national level, and to which one or more unions represented in the NBC is affiliated, will be allowed one seat in NBC. In case three or more unions represented in the NBC are affiliated to a CTUO, they will be allotted one additional seat. Notwithstanding the above, the existing four CTUOs will continue to have at least one seat each in the NBC.

Interim arrangement

In view of the fact that long-term agreement on reconstitution may take some time to materialise, the following interim arrangement has been agreed upon to start urgent negotiations for the ensuing wage revision:

- i. Power stations which meet the existing criteria of representation in the NBC – i.e., which have more than 500 workmen, but are not represented through any of their unions – may be represented through a union. This currently applies to power stations of Kahalgaon, Rihand, Unchahar, Dadri and Talcher.
- ii. Of the above, in Talcher the representative union has already been identified by the state government through election by secret ballot. The same may be allotted a seat in the NBC.

- iii. As an interim arrangement for the purpose of representing the four other eligible stations, it is agreed that each of the CTUOs will be allotted an additional seat in the NBC essentially for representing the above power stations.
- iv. In case any station out of the above four still remains unrepresented, the majority union may be identified by the station management through the existing 'Check Off System' (at Dadri) or through any of the mechanisms as agreed between local management and eligible unions.

Major Unions at NTPC, Unchahar

There are four major unions at the Unchahar Power Station: NTPC Power Karamchari Sangh, NTPC Employees' Union, NTPC Mazdoor Sangh and NTPC Electric Employees Union. Table 1 summarises the objectives, purpose of formation, methods used, structure, membership, and election details for each of these unions.

NTPC Power Karamchari Sangh

Presently the NTPC Power Karamchari Sangh is the representative union in the NBC, as per the last elections held. Earlier it was called 'NTPC Pravidhik Karamchari Sangh'. Affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and inspired by the CPI (Marxist), the Karamchari Sangh follows a communist philosophy. It negotiates with management about the workers' interests and problems. With its inception at the Unchahar Station in the year 1992, the Sangh now boasts of 310 members as of the last elections.

NTPC Employees Union

This union is affiliated with the INTUC and has adopted the ideologies of the Congress Party. It began its operations on 28 April 2000. The Employees Union negotiates with management at the plant level. It has 140 members as of the last elections.

Table 1
Unions at NTPC, Unchahar

S. No.	Name of Union	Purpose of formation	Objectives	Methods	Structure	Membership	Elections
1.	NTPC Power Karamchari Sangh (affiliated to CITU)	To organise all workmen/employees who do not fall under the executive and supervisory categories and are defined as "workmen" in terms of the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947.	Organising workers to further their interests in economic, social and political matters.	Legislation, demonstrations, agitations and intensification of the class struggle.	President, Vice President, General Secretary, Organising Secretary, Joint Secretary, Publicity Secretary, Office Secretary & Treasurer. 11 members in the Executive Committee (May 2008).	Subscription of 20 paise per year per member	Union leader and office bearers have tenure of two years; election of the representative union takes place every year.
2.	NTPC Employees Union	To organise all workmen/employees who do not fall under the executive and supervisory categories, and are defined as "workmen" as per the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947.	To ensure full employment and secure greater participation of workers in the management of enterprises. To improve the conditions at work.	Peaceful through the process of law and negotiations.	11 members in the Executive Committee (May 2008).	Subscription rate of not less than 25 paise per month.	Election takes place every year.
3.	NTPC Mazdoor Sangh	To organise all workmen/employees who do not fall under the executive and supervisory categories, and are defined as "workmen" as per the Industrial Disputes Act of 1947.	To improve work conditions and provide various social security measures.	Legitimate, peaceful and democratic.	23 office bearers (May 2008).	Subscription rate of not less than 25 paise per month.	Election takes place every year.
4.	NTPC Electric Employees Union (EEU)	To organise all the workmen/employees who do not fall under executive and supervisory categories of electricity organisations of Uttar Pradesh, namely the UP Power Corporation, NTPC Unchahar, Electricity Production Departments, and The Cooperative Electric Society Ltd.	To ensure full employment and secure greater participation of workers in the management of enterprises. To improve the conditions at work.	Peaceful through the process of law and negotiations.	10 office bearers and 11 members.	Membership fee of Rs.25 per year.	Election takes place every 2 years.

Comment [ED1]: Since you spell out the currency name for the other unions, you probably want to do the same here. I am not certain of the conventions in Indian finance, however.

NTPC Mazdoor Sangh

Before NTPC took over the Unchahar Station, this Union was regarded as UP Vidyut Mazdoor Sangh. Subsequently, in the year 2001, NTPC Mazdoor Sangh became affiliated with the Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh, and has adopted the principles of Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). It also negotiates with management at the plant level. There are 138 members of this union.

NTPC Electric Employees Union (EEU)

Before the takeover of the Plant by NTPC, this union was known as NTPC Hydro Electric Employees Union (HEEU). It came into operation at NTPC Unchahar on 28 April 2000, and became affiliated with INTUC in 2005. The EEU has adopted its constitution from the philosophies of the Congress Party. As of the 2007–2008 elections, there were 185 members in the Union. It is in the minority since it receives less than 10% of the vote in the last election, and hence it does not negotiate with management in a substantial way.

Other Unions at NTPC, Unchahar

Other recognised unions of NTPC, Unchahar include Feroze Gandhi Urja Thermal Power Plant (FGUTPP) Pariyojna Karamchari Sangh (independent), FGUTPP Pravidhik Karamchari Sangh (independent), UP Vidyut Mazdoor Sangh (affiliated to Bhartiya Mazdoor Sangh) and NTPC Shramik Sangh (affiliated to UTUC). Unions that are not recognised include the UP Vidyut Panchayat and NTPC Workers' Association.

LABOUR WELFARE AND ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS AT NTPC, UNCHAHAR

Trade unions at NTPC not only act as a mechanism to give voice to employee grievances and problems before management, but they also are fairly involved in welfare measures for workers and in improving the quality of their work life; all such measures may be categorised under ancillary functions of unions as discussed earlier. They actively participate in discussions with management at different levels regarding safety, work conditions, and various other worker-related issues. Meetings are held from time to time in which management and union representatives discuss and try to resolve several issues, the primary ones pertaining to labour welfare.

Welfare activities of the workers at Unchahar Power Station are divided into two broad categories: plant welfare and township welfare.

Plant Welfare

Under this category, the following facilities are provided for the employees:

- i. *Canteen facilities:* The canteens in the plant are run by the Indian Coffee Workers Cooperative Society (ICWCS), affiliated to the All India Coffee Workers Cooperative Society (AICWS), New Delhi.
- ii. *Drinking water facilities:* Union ensures provision of water coolers for the employees in the plant, offices and canteens.
- iii. *Other facilities:* Among other facilities, workers are provided with restrooms.

Township Welfare

Welfare bodies such as Union Working Committees, the Employee Welfare Association (EWA) and the Township Advisory Development Committee (TADC) look into the affairs of township welfare at NTPC, Unchahar. Entertainment outlets, such as cable TV facilities, reading rooms, music halls, and sports theatres, are being taken care of by the representative trade union. In addition, there are facilities like activity centres for the workers' children and the Sports Council, which organises various sporting events for the employees, such as cricket, football, table tennis, and other games. There are three schools in the township, the infrastructure of which is provided by NTPC.

There are different clubs and associations at the Plant, which organise various events for workers at the Plant. Different types of programmes on subjects such as technical skills, safety and information management systems are also organised for the employees (including workers) by the Employee Development Center (EDC).

The township thus benefits through the enrichment of workers' lives by way of social associations and education. In fact, the plant is witness to enthusiastic involvement of both management and union representatives towards the welfare of workers and their families, thus bringing about their overall development.

It can hence be inferred that with such a wide diversity of welfare measures taken by the NTPC, Unchahar unions, thus moving beyond their traditional function of simply bargaining, unions at the plant are striving towards improvement not only in the work life of employees, but also in their social life.

MEETINGS: LEVELS AND ISSUES DISCUSSED

Levels of Meetings

Meetings at the Plant are an important means to take care of the overall development of workers. Issues related to plant improvement, labour problems and labour welfare are discussed here. The following are the different types of meeting at NTPC, Unchahar:

Shop Level Committee (SLC) Meetings

There are four SLCs which function in the areas of Operations, Maintenance, Coal Handling, and Plant and Service Department. In these meetings, issues related to plant productivity, safety, quality improvement and cost-cutting are raised and discussed. Broadly speaking, SLCs oversee decision-making for the development of the plant as a whole. Meetings are attended by representative members of unions and associations, and also by representatives of management.

Plant Level Committee (PLC) Meetings

Issues unresolved at the shop level are taken up in these meetings. PLC meetings take place once every four months, and are attended by specific representative members of unions and management.

Direct Meetings of Union with General Manager

These meetings take place when an issue cannot be resolved in either of the abovementioned meetings.

Township Advisory Development Committee (TADC) Meetings

These meetings are also attended by representatives from unions and associations and management. Issues such as the development of the township in context with civil work, electrical work and safety are discussed.

Canteen Maintenance Committee (CMC) Meetings

As is evident from the name itself, in these meetings issues related to improving canteen facilities and renovations are discussed between the union, association representatives and management. The frequency of such meetings is once every two months.

Issues Discussed in Various Meetings

Interviews of employees of the Plant revealed that the issues raised and/or discussed in various meetings include the following: union finances, union agendas, workers' welfare progress, annual seminars to be organised, fee structure in the schools of the township, drinking water for the workers in the township, wages/salary considerations, decisions regarding dual pension, wage reconsideration for workers on muster roll, communication through newsletters and magazines, transparency in EWA proceedings, required improvements in the complaints and suggestions system, pension schemes, promotion and transfer of employees, effectiveness of union functioning, maintenance of roads, housing facilities, safety of workers in the sub-station, maintenance of roads in the township, beautification of parks, organisation of sports meets, improvements in school infrastructure, commencement of diploma courses, and improvement in hospital services.

Thus it can be seen that labour welfare, workers' grievances, and QWL for employees are rated among the priorities in such meetings. Union and management representatives who were interviewed have stated that decisions taken on these issues during meetings are usually implemented within the time decided on in the meetings.

LESSONS FROM THE STUDY

Plant-level unions not only of other stations of NTPC, but also of other organisations, can draw lessons from the array of functions undertaken towards better QWL by the unions at Unchahar Station. Participation of union members in decision-making regarding welfare activities, as is in vogue in NTPC, Unchahar, may be taken as an example by other organisations. Unions may also take the example of Unchahar and actively involve themselves in organising training and development programmes on subjects such as technical skills, computers, and safety measures at work, to ensure a healthy and safe working and learning environment. Not only the individual development of workers, but the welfare of workers' families and the quality of their social lives may also be taken up as a concern by unions. The initiatives taken up by the unions at the Unchahar plant regarding township welfare, ranging from providing education to organising cultural events, may be regarded as precedents by other unions.

CONCLUSIONS

From the entire gamut of issues it is evident that trade unions at NTPC, Unchahar are not only playing an active role in maintaining good industrial relations, but they are also adequately involved in improving the quality of work life of employees. Roles once considered secondary and ancillary are gradually metamorphosing into an extension of primary functions of unions at the Unchahar plant. In fact, the welfare of workers seems to be an inseparable component of the functions of these unions.

Considering the fact that union membership is limited to only 13–15 million workers, out of a gargantuan 496.4 million-person workforce in India (of which 80% are members of unions affiliated with one of the five major national level trade unions) (<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/77593.htm>), declining membership is a major issue for labour unions. Thus, when trade unions are aiming at attracting more members, active involvement in welfare measures may result in increased membership.

Further, if a union is actively involved in labour welfare at the plant and/or organisation level, workers may be motivated to remain attached to it, rather than joining another union. In this way, the problem of mushroom growth of small unions may be curbed. However, establishing any link between union participation in labour welfare and the lowering of the multiplicity of unions is beyond the scope of this paper, and can be taken up as an area of further research.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Since the information collected during the course of the study was based entirely on the opinions of the respondents, there may be an element of bias in the results. This suggests that a survey-based study of a random sampling of respondents, followed by statistical analysis of data collected, might be necessary to validate the results obtained in this study.

Due to constraints of resources and time, not many workers could be interviewed. It is obvious that findings could have been more accurate if more employees could be interviewed. The same constraints hindered a comparison of the functioning of unions across different plants of NTPC, which could have yielded interesting insights.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER STUDY

The contribution of this paper lies in the fact that, taking a case of a PSU, it provides insight into the roles of trade unions in India, which are operating in a changing business scenario. The study shows that the roles of trade unions have definitely evolved from simply being protagonists of workers' rights to ensuring better quality of work life for employees. It further leads to several questions, such as: are the functions of trade unions *actually* bringing about any substantial improvement in workers' lives? What is the satisfaction level of workers regarding the roles of trade unions at the plant level? What are the expectations of both workers and management from trade unions in a dynamic business environment?

In large Indian PSU's, it is normally observed that unions are more involved in politics than on concentrating on the welfare of the workers. The leaders and the office bearers are more focused on fulfilling their personal interests without paying any heed to the hard-working labourers. A similar study in other PSU's could help to gain critical insight in these issues of how unions function.

It is also essential to know where unions in India stand as compared to unions in other countries. With increasing globalisation, workers from different cultures and backgrounds are coming to work together. They need to understand each other's feelings and interests, which will ultimately help in building a healthy work environment. To this effect, it becomes necessary that workers have soft skills along with technical knowledge. They also need to be tech-savvy, to cope with the challenges presented in an age of information technology. All these necessitate broadening of the ambitions of trade unions.

A further study on the probable link between welfare activities of unions and union membership could also provide a vital contribution to the existing literature on industrial relations. A more comprehensive study could also be conducted to understand the newer roles that may be expected from trade unions.

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