

Unionization – IT Way

I had written about unionization in the IT industry some months back in this column. The recent



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debate on the same subject, both in the media columns and the political circles, tempts me to treat this subject once again. Let me make it clear. I do not want to take any sides – neither that of the IT companies, the employees, or the political parties. I do not know whether such disclaimers border on hypocrisy, but still I will try to be as objective as possible.

I am not a student of history. But still I have some idea about the growth of trade unions, mostly because I have seen the extremes of unionization and, more importantly, the reasons that compelled people to unionize, as a student and as an inhabitant of Calcutta (now Kolkata). I cannot, for certain, tell with temerity that the trajectory of the Indian trade union movement was totally unwarranted. Wherever

exploitation raises its fangs, there will be an escape route. That is a natural process to give vent to inter-generational concentration of exploitation. Sometimes, it takes virulent forms and at times sedentary precipitation, which may not lead to violence or forceful expression of disdain and frustration. History is replete with such examples. Armed revolutions, peaceful marches spearheaded by Mahatma Gandhi, the more recent sporadic trade union belligerence in the European Union, etc. are some of the examples before us to reflect on.

I am not going to get into a philosophical debate on the nuts and bolts of unionization. Let me introspect on how such unionization is going to benefit or adversely affect the stakeholders. Unionization has taken different forms and hues at different times. In Europe, especially in coal belts, it has taken militant forms in the post-industrial revolution era. In Japan, protests were symbolic like working extra hours to show to the management the tenacity of labour and their tolerance power. Back in India, Mahatma taught us to be non-violent and led us to Satyagraha, as a powerful tool for ventilating grievances. There is a great awakening of that method of protest in the recent days the world over. I am not referring to the Gandhigiri let loose by a single movie that has become the talk of the time in the Indian landscape. If the public lent their emotional support to that film and if there is a general feeling in the Indian

psyche against strikes and lockouts, we have to take heed of the cultural changes that are shaping our new generation.

As a student in Calcutta, I have seen month-long strikes and demonstrations. I have seen a plethora of trade unions rising and withering. I have seen trade union leaders – great, not-so-great and those who have self before everything else. They were products of the contemporary times and some of them intellectuals, who struck an immediate bond with the exploited class. They had a vision and a game plan to achieve that vision. They did not create a union out of people who do not have a common issue. They did not create a union only for swelling their ranks, though some sort of vote bank politics must have crept in due course. They did create unions for the common good of the people, to ward them off from organized exploitation.

Now, let us apply these tests to gauge whether there is any organized exploitation in the IT industry. BPO is a leveraged industry and it exists because of differences of wages and time zones. If Indian wages become overheated, labour arbitrage is totally lost, and you can see Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and even Pakistan snatching away what India is gaining now. That will create millions of job losses to India. Let us look at it from the other side. What will happen if our BPO cannot deliver things in time due to strikes and lockouts.

We have to keep in mind that there are thousands of BPOs springing up in places like Poland, Russia, the Philippines and they are waiting on the wings to grab the opportunity. Should we have to give them what they are desiring for in a platter? What I am telling is that exploitation should not be allowed in the IT sector. If any such overarching tendency is prevalent with any set of companies, such tendencies have to be curbed. There are natural checks and balances. Working in an IT firm is not alone driven by money. It has a creative and intellectual appeal. Once that is blocked, there will be an exodus of people, since there are many opportunities springing up every day. No one can exploit the employees for long and still a player in the field. Sooner or later, he will bite the dust.

The knowledge industry is essentially different from the brick and mortar. The difference between the employee and employer is blurred. I have been an employee not so long ago. Now, I am an employer of over 400 people, cutting across geographies. A few people who have worked with me are now entrepreneurs. I strongly believe that an increasing number of such tribes will occupy the Indian IT space. Then, what is the difference between an employer and an employee? Should we then create an artificial wedge? That is the billion-dollar question that the enlightened political leadership should address. ■