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## Union Imperatives from Unionized White Collar Employees' Perspective: The Case of Tata Employees Union\*

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### Abstract

*The paper examines the attitude of white collar unionized employees' towards their union and management under three key themes – work related dimensions, union related dimensions and staff members' loyalty towards union and management. The investigation is based on survey and informal interviews of white collar employees of Tata Centre, the corporate head-office of Tata Steel, India. The analysis suggests the existence of dual loyalty amongst those surveyed. For work related dimensions (e.g. job assignments, recruitment, salary determination, training, career) this aspiring segment believe that management has more influential role to play than the union. Management increasingly is curbing the power distance between unionized members and the officers to reinforce the loyalty of this white collar segment. However, staff members are still loyal towards the union, since union performs an important role of job security provider, which members' value. The paper also captures changing role of union over its sixty-one years of existence and the areas of improvement, based on its members' perception.*

**Key Words:** white collar, union, loyalty, India.

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## Union Imperatives from Unionized White Collar Employees' Perspective: The Case of Tata Employees Union

### INTRODUCTION

Generally a distinction is being made between white collar worker and blue collar workers. White-collar worker refers to those salaried professionals whose job is clerical in nature, and blue collar workers are those whose job is more manual in nature. It is also believed that white collar workers get more salary than blue collar workers. Due to worldwide technological revolution the proportion of white collar workers in the total workforce got increased from 17% in 1900 to 59.4% in 1998<sup>3</sup>. White collar workers, like blue collar workers can form their own unions and can take measures ranging from collective bargaining to strikes for getting their grievances/demands settled. In the manufacturing sector, white collar employees unions co-exist with blue color unions often as separate entities. In the Indian context serious study of such white collar employees' unions is very limited.

In general, white collar segment of employees have some unique needs in terms of career aspirations, their yearnings for upward mobility, lifestyle, and their education. Being closer in proximity to executive/managerial class and relatively more educated than the blue colored counterparts, their view of life and careers are different.

So there is considerable need to address how these employees perceive their unions from various dimensions. Review of literature shows declining trend in union membership in general (Carruth, Alan and Disney, Richard, 1988, Waddington et. al, 1997), often it is getting cited (Venkataratnam, 2003) that knowledge based workforce are doing protean career management, where employees are defining their job profiles on their own, and its implication is seen in declining role of union. Like Hall (2004) describes, as opposed to traditional career system where organization takes charge of individual's career, now is the era of protean career management where individual employees' take charge. Rousseau (1995) has also emphasized on changes in employment relations, with more focus being shifted to short term, as opposed to longer term contracts.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White\\_collar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_collar)

In India, early 1980s saw declining role of unions due to workers losing faith and confidence in militant trade unions (Budhwar, 2003). Study by Seth (1996) showed declining membership and alienation of members from union. Increasing knowledge based workers are regarded as one of the reasons for the decline in membership of union (Budhwar, 2003).

At the same time, management is taking proactive stances by opening up the promotion opportunities for lower rank employees, and workers are having less loyalty towards union (Beng, 1980; Handley, 1989; Gani,1996). Traditionally, unions were the dominant force to speak for the workers' needs, wage demands, workplace management issues etc that required management intervention. However, today the very institution that supported employees in the industrial economy is in need of change. The shift is required in the context of organizations movement to a more global, knowledge driven economy (Seth, 1996) and the shift in orientation of employees from collectivity to individualism. These changes call for an internal transformation within unions itself, where they need to redefine the agenda and become conscious about the requirement of its members.

In the context of changing views about trade unionism among members of a white collar union, this paper discusses about adaptations that are required on the part of the union to make the transition a smooth one, keeping in mind employees' benefit agenda. The empirical evidence from Tata Employees Union, India has given richness in understanding the possible strategic imperatives in front of the union.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE PAPER**

Our objective in this paper is to explore the attitude of white collar employees about unionism, given that there are more promotion, career growth opportunities, employees (union members) are skilled to occupy higher positions and there was also organizational downsizing which has taken place in the company thrice in 1996, 1999 and in 2003. In essence our attempt is to understand and explore how union leadership is being perceived by the employees and what future imperatives lie for the union in the light of the perceptions.

### **CONTEXT OF THE ORGANIZATION**

Enterprise trade unions in the formal sector exist within the context of an organization. The organization in this case is Tata Steel and the trade union studied is part of its employment relations framework. Before we discuss about the union, it is necessary to understand the

organization also, since the enterprise trade union's role can be defined and analyzed only with reference to the peculiarities of the organization.

Tata Steel, established in 1907 is Asia's first and largest private sector integrated steel company. The company, earlier known as TISCO (The Tata Iron and Steel Company Limited) is recognized as world's lowest cost producer of steel, and world's best steel producer<sup>4</sup>. It has its manufacturing plant located in Jamshedpur (Jharkand State), corporate office at Kolkata, group head office (Tata Group) in Mumbai and sales offices scattered all over India. There are two cadres of permanent employees at Tata Steel, i.e officers and non-officers. Amongst the non officers, those who work in the mines, collieries and plants are referred to as workers, whereas the employees who work in the offices (corporate & sales) are referred to as staff members, who are the white collar employees. Tata Steel has two unions, the Jamshedpur Workers' Union (JWU or alternatively called Tata Workers Union - TWU) and Tata Employees Union (TEU), representing the workers and office employees (includes both staff and sub staff members) respectively. TEU has members from corporate and sales offices but excludes Jamshedpur/mines based office workers. Established in 1937<sup>5</sup>, Jamshedpur Workers' Union has 16,000<sup>6</sup> members (includes workers and supervisors), and it is recognized as the sole bargaining agent for determining bonus and Leave travel allowance (LTA) for the entire organization. TEU on the other hand, has the right to engage in negotiation with management for salary and allied benefits for all staff and sub-staff office employees (except for Jamshedpur office employees, where TWU negotiates and determines the wage and other benefits for the office employees). The dynamics between Jamshedpur Workers' Union and Tata Employees Union is quite interesting. When both the elected unions are affiliated to same political ideology, then no issues of conflicting nature should arise. Conflicts at the inter-union level might arise when there are different politically aligned dynamics amongst these two unions<sup>7</sup>.

TEU got registered with the Government of West Bengal on 13<sup>th</sup> August, 1946 and was recognized by the company on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 1946. Currently TEU has membership base of

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<sup>4</sup> World Steel Dynamics, 2005([www.worldsteeldynamics.com](http://www.worldsteeldynamics.com))

<sup>5</sup> [www.thehindubusinessline.com/2007/08/26/stories/2007082650020200.htm](http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/2007/08/26/stories/2007082650020200.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Figure provided by President, TEU

<sup>7</sup> Currently the elected members of Jamshedpur Workers' Union are affiliated to INTUC. Tata Employees' Union is affiliated to Federation of Mercantile Employees' Union (FMEU), which is influenced by CPI (M)'s ideology.

nearly 510<sup>8</sup>, which covers all the white collar employees of the corporate and sales offices (total 23 sales offices) of Tata Steel. All the non-officer employees, working in the corporate office and sales offices are eligible for becoming TEU members after completion of probationary period of 6 months. TEU has its own independent rules and constitution and the objectives of TEU are given in **Appendix-1**. All the office bearers of TEU are elected through a democratic process. There are approximately 19-20 representatives<sup>9</sup>, from Kolkata who are office bearers. In the branch offices, the local unions<sup>10</sup> operate with the support of TEU and their members are also enrolled as TEU members. Since 1948 (when the first All India Conference of was held) TEU organized various conferences where branch unions and TEU's Calcutta Chapter met. This has enabled TEU to strengthen the relationship with branch unions. Except the fierce strike<sup>11</sup> that took place in May, 1958 by Jamshedpur Workers Union, overall the industrial relations scenario of the company is harmonious (Kannappan, 1959). Tata Steel is also known as a model employer and its union-management relationship is a case study in progressive relationship building (Saiyaddin, 2001).

The reported study has been carried out with the unionized members located at the corporate office Tata Centre, Kolkata, in India. Study of these white collar employees as distinct from the blue collared was chosen, since individualistic career orientation is expected to be more dominant than collective orientation. The respondents are all located at urban city Kolkata, in the state of West Bengal. Despite the fact that West Bengal is noted<sup>12</sup> to have number of industrial disputes (including in service sector like banks and insurance) leading to strikes etc. its reflection is very rarely seen in the office.

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF TATA EMPLOYEES UNION**

The background behind formation of Tata Employees Union goes back to 1939<sup>13</sup>, when with the initiative of Mr. Prodyut Ghosh<sup>14</sup> the concerns of clerical apprentices employed by the

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<sup>8</sup> The estimate is collected the President of TEU

<sup>9</sup> The number of executives in the union is determined by the staff strength. Earlier total executive members in the union used to be 25.

<sup>10</sup> Local unions generate their own separate funds.

<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy to mention that the strike in Tata Steel in 1928 took place when Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose was the President of The Labour Association, Jamshedpur (prior to official formation of TWU) (<http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/bline/2007/08/26/stories/2007082650040400.htm>)

<sup>12</sup> [www.cpiml.org/liberation/year\\_2001/sepember/com4\\_wb.htm](http://www.cpiml.org/liberation/year_2001/sepember/com4_wb.htm)

<sup>13</sup> It is pertinent to note here The Indian Trade Union Act, 1926 gave employees' representatives a social status, sanctity and legalization and provided two essential laws, firstly, laws related to union and secondly, non-legal, non-legislative and voluntary code of discipline, which also strengthened unionism in India.

company, who had to work without remuneration was raised. Sometimes the apprenticeship continued for few years. Under pressure from the group led by Mr. Ghosh, Tata management had to make some changes in the rules and apprenticeship allowance of Rupees Twenty per month got introduced. This success encouraged the group to voice concerns to employers and early forties saw the seeds of unionization sown in the head office. They voiced issues about improvement of grades and introduction of some allowance to combat the rising inflation during the World War period. Incremental rise in grades eventually took place and inspired by this successful move, some more concerns such as against rude behavior of some officers and also against imposition of increasing workloads on the employees were raised. When in 1945, retrenchment of a few temporary hands took place and more retrenchments of such employees were being contemplated, backed by a good number of permanent staff, their delegates were sent to talk to management. As a result some retrenched employees got re-employed. A matter, in which all efforts failed, was with respect to bank holidays. On such holidays, even on some days during the local festivals (Durga Puja festival celebrated with fervor in the state), though the office was declared to be closed but most of the employees had to attend office as ‘skeleton staff’ without any overtime wages<sup>15</sup>. The situation and issues were much different in the works (Jamshedpur) where JWU represented the workers. Hence the need for a separate union to represent the office workers outside Jamshedpur came up.

Eventually TEU got formed on 10<sup>th</sup> July, 1946<sup>16</sup> as a separate union for office employees alone. This union has seen upheavals in different phases of its 61 years existence. 50 years souvenir<sup>17</sup> of TEU reveals that since its inception the union was associated with freedom movements, general strikes (noted ones being in support of the struggle for liberation of Goa,

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<sup>14</sup> Later on who became the Secretary of Tata Employees Union

<sup>15</sup> Apart from the grievances, a few moves on political matters were made in those days. In the wake of freedom struggle of '42, for instance, quite a good number of employees of Sales Department in reference to an appeal made by Sir Ardeshir Dalal for withdrawal of political strike in Jamshedpur, addressed a letter on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 1942 to the Management requesting them to urge upon the Government to release the leaders and workers of the movement.

<sup>16</sup> In 1945 the employees of TISCO Calcutta raised an appreciable donation for the Tramway workers who had been on strike for over 90 days – the strike that inspired the entire working people. Union was still not formed. At that time there were significant taboos against formation of union.

<sup>17</sup> Internal document : Tata Employees Union : 50 years (1946-1996)

and against the Government's announcement about possible merger of West Bengal with Bihar). When in 1951, in many offices a time-and-motion study of the clerical jobs by IBCON, a British firm got carried out, TEU along with other unions lodged protest against it apprehending that it might result in retrenchment. On 13<sup>th</sup> March, 1953, anti-retrenchment day was observed when a demonstration of TEU along with other unions gheraoed the Assembly house for more than two hours. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1953, TEU participated in a general strike against the increase of tram fare by one paisa. Apart from general movement, the union also showed agitation against low benefit structure of its employees over a period of 1954 to 1957. The agitation took an amicable turn only in 1957, followed by a pay strike, when management entered in agreement with union with respect to enhanced grade entitlements and tiffin allowances of staff and sub-staff members. TEU participated in various strikes<sup>18</sup> on different issues along with other unions and in response to the call of Federation of Mercantile Employees' Union (FMEU), with which it is affiliated almost till 1980. The souvenir aptly summarizes TEU's current position vis-à-vis its earlier image as agitating union, as quoted below:

*"Gone are the days, perhaps for ever, and the relation between the Management and Employees, and for that matter, the Union, stands much improved, despite the differences on some questions, and particularly on matters which are basic and fundamental"*<sup>19</sup>.

Since the first agreement between management and union on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1947, till the latest on 2nd of November, 2000, TEU has signed eleven agreements on wage claims and allied benefits with management. Tata Steel saw merger with Indian Tubes Company in 1985, and TEU accepted the employees of merged company into its fold. It also saw introduction of early separation scheme (ESS) in three phases, leading to substantial reduction in employment. Currently, outsourcing<sup>20</sup> of work coupled with IT deployment<sup>21</sup> across the board, and company wide business re-organization<sup>22</sup> has allowed the company to reduce

<sup>18</sup> An hour's pen-down strike observed on 25<sup>th</sup> November, 1966 & 15<sup>th</sup> December 1967, a day's strike on 6<sup>th</sup> March, one hour strike on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1969, two hour strike on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1969, a day's strike on 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1970, and 10<sup>th</sup> August 1970. The union participated in "Bharatbandh" (All Bengal strike) in 1975 in support of striking railway men.

<sup>19</sup> Internal document : Tata Employess Union : 50 years (1946-1996)

<sup>20</sup> The Hindu Business Line, May 11, 2002 (<http://www.blonnet.com/2002/05/11/stories/2002051100320500.htm>)

<sup>21</sup> [www.tata.com/0\\_media/features/interviews/20000626j\\_j\\_irani.htm](http://www.tata.com/0_media/features/interviews/20000626j_j_irani.htm)

<sup>22</sup> When Lafarge took over Cement Division of Tata Steel in 1999, then all the fourteen staff members associated with the steel company had to join Lafarge. When Tata Martrade International Logistics Ltd



office employees<sup>23</sup>. Economic growth of India has opened career avenues for employees, particularly those with experience in companies like Tata Steel known for its systems and practices<sup>24</sup>. So our, question to the union leaders and the unionized employees (members) were how do they perceive union now?

## METHODOLOGY

We adopted the survey method to gauge white collar staff members' attitude towards union and management on the same issues. The issues have been categorised into three separate sections. The first section focused on five important aspects of work, such as immediate work related aspects, financial dimension, administrative dimension, long term career related dimension and emotional support dimension. Respondents were requested to rate the role of both union and management separately in each of these five dimensions in a five point scale. In the second section of the questionnaire, the focus was entirely on union representatives (leaders) and respondents were requested to rate various aspects (union representatives' communication ability, co-ordination ability, attitude towards general staff members, and accessibility of union representatives at the time of need). The third section openly asked respondents to rate their loyalty towards union and towards management and also members "willingness" to be associated with the union. After, taking permission from the Tata Employees Union's executive council, we circulated 50 questionnaires among union members working at Tata Center, Kolkata. The respondents were staff members<sup>25</sup> from Administration Department, Accounts Division, Ferro Alloys and Manganese Department, Flat Products and Tubes Division of Tata Centre. We also informally interacted with the union leaders and staff and sub staff members to enrich our understanding about why they perceive some of the aspects mentioned in the questionnaire. Response rate was 64% (The analysis is shown in **Exhibit 1**). The respondents were assured of complete anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

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(TMILL) came into existence on 17th June 2002 as a joint venture between Tata Steel and I Q Martrade Holding und Management, then all the sixteen staff members earlier employed in Shipping and Chartering Division of Tata Steel became TMILL employees.

<sup>23</sup> [http://www.tata.com/0\\_our\\_commitment/employee\\_relations/articles/20050121\\_tatasteel\\_vrs.htm](http://www.tata.com/0_our_commitment/employee_relations/articles/20050121_tatasteel_vrs.htm)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.hinduonnet.com/jobs/0801/2008013050050700.htm>

<sup>25</sup> We have not administered the questionnaire amongst sub staff members, for our current study.

**Exhibit1. Survey findings on unionized employees' attitude towards union****Section1. Who takes the major determining role on the following aspects, Management or Union?**

1=minimum influence, 5= maximum influence

<b>Decisional Dimensions</b>	<b>Mean Score for Union</b>	<b>Mean Score for Management</b>	<b>Gap Analysis</b>
<b>A. Immediate work related Dimensions</b>			
Recruitment Decision	2.5	4.1	1.6
Job Assignment Related Decision	1.56	4.6	3.04
Training Related Decision	1.63	4.5	2.87
<b>B. Financial Dimensions</b>			
Salary related decision	3.39	3.85	.46
DA, Housing, Transportation & Tiffin Allowances	3.06	3.65	.57
Bonus Related Decision	3.06	4.05	.99
Making Medical facilities available	3.44	3.67	.23
<b>C. Administrative Dimensions</b>			
Workplace Arrangement (Sitting arrangement, Light, A.C., etc.)	2.17	4.15	1.98
Working hours related decision	3.33	4.3	.97
<b>D. Long Term Career related Dimensions</b>			
Furtherance of Career(promotion opportunity) Related Decisions	1.43	4.44	3.01
Early Separations Related Decision	2.21	3.81	1.6
Job Security Related decision	4.11	3.78	-.33
<b>E. Mental Support Dimensions</b>			
Helping in individual problem	3	3.3	.3
Whom do you feel comfortable to voice your concern	3	3.11	.11

**Section2. Rating of existing union executives body's effectiveness in 5point scale, where 1=min, 5=max**

<b>Union related dimensions</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
Communication of union executive members (the information you get from them)	3.11
Co-ordination between management and employees by union executive body	3.44
Union Executive body's attitude towards general staff members	3.63
Leadership Effectiveness of union representative	3.67
Accessibility of union executive members at the time of need	4

**Section3. Loyalty towards management vis a vis union, where 1=min, 5=max**

<b>Loyalty</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
Your willingness to be a member of union	4
Your loyalty towards union?	3.63
Your loyalty towards management?	4.13

## **DISCUSSION**

As seen in **Exhibit 1**, except for job security related decision in all the other dimensions (immediate work related dimensions, financial dimensions, administrative dimensions, mental support dimensions), as perceived by staff members, management is credited with playing more active role than union. As we discuss various dimensions under different heads, we would see, management is ensuring that the power distance between managers (officers) and staff members get reduced (through skill enhancement of staff members, through opening up promotion opportunities to staff members, providing same canteen facility to both staff members and officers, no separate cubicle for officers etc.) These aspects subtly encourage members to be more like officers and behave likewise, including willingness to stay back in the office for longer hours.

It also seems Tata Steel's management has adopted an inclusivist strategy<sup>26</sup>, by providing proactively all traditional benefits that a Trade Union earlier had to negotiate for<sup>27</sup>. Overtly, non-unionized employees get to share resources (canteen, restrooms, recreation etc.) that are available to officers also, though status entitlements might differ.

## **A. IMMEDIATE WORK RELATED DIMENSIONS**

As **Exhibit 1** shows, unionized staff believes in all three aspects, such as recruitment of staff members, job assignment of staff members and training related decisions - management takes more important role than the union.

### **Recruitment Decision**

As per the agreement with union, the company wide policy in Tata Steel is that all staff members (non-officers) are recruited from a pool created on the basis of "nominations" by existing employees. Thus, recruitment related decisions under control of union include whom to recruit, how to recruit, how many to recruit, when to recruit and the criteria on the basis of which selection is made. Based on the seniority of the existing employee and the vacancy that arises, one employee in his/her total tenure can nominate one ward as a candidate for the recruitment examination. Previously an existing employee could have nominated almost any relative, but recently on the basis of the discussion with union, employees can nominate only his or her wards for consideration of employment. Previously, the minimum qualification for staff members was school final, but on the basis of negotiation with union the basic entry criteria for staff positions got raised to graduation (college degree). Adequate knowledge of computer applications and sound communication ability are other criterion. Earlier the selection used to happen through written test and interviews, now since higher entry criteria has been set, the written test has been dispensed with. In the interview board for selection, the panel of interviewers consists of two management representatives, with necessarily one representative from union, and one computer proficient person either from management's side or from union's side<sup>28</sup>. Union representative's opinion in selection decision of a candidate has the same weightage as that of the management representatives' decision. When

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<sup>26</sup> As Noronha and D'Cruz (2006), inclusivist strategies include human resource management orientation.

Inclusivist strategies might require union to be supportive of management's HR system.

<sup>27</sup> In general trade union's traditional role was known as negotiator for workplace betterment, pay improvement, job allocation.

<sup>28</sup> The composition of recruitment panel might vary based on management's discretion.

we probed the union leader as whether management is genuine in selecting the candidate, his remark was:

*“Management is very considerate and lenient in the interview board”*

The current rule in the company also includes that when a staff member takes leave for more than 21 days, then a temporary staff member can be recruited in his/her place as a leave substitute. These temporary staffs also go through the same selection criteria as the permanent staff members. The only difference between permanent and temporary staffs is that the nominating employees' seniority in case of temporary staffs is lesser as compared to that of the permanent staff member. Earlier, in order to avoid giving permanent job offer to the temporary staff members<sup>29</sup> these temporary members were offered job at a stretch for 84 days. Currently the maximum number of days at a stretch a temporary worker can work has been further reduced to 30 days (subsequent to the reduction from 84 days to 58 days). For sub staff members against 1 day leave of a permanent sub staff member, a temporary sub staff can be recruited. The maximum period at a stretch a temporary sub staff can work is 30 days. TEU's standpoint about this pool of temporary staff and sub staffs is that they try their best to secure permanent jobs for the temporary members. Transition from temporary status to permanent status of members also imply increased membership base for union. Job shrinkage all over the office hindered this transition to certain extent and TEU had accepted this aspect. Interaction with staff members revealed that staff members' believe the permanent job offer is not always a transparent process.

Generally, staff members' service is non-transferable between locations. However within the same location, intra-departmental transfer is possible, based on management's discretion. Union has not much power to decide intra-departmental transfer. For locational transfer (for example, from one state to the other) on the basis of staff member's request to both union and management, and subject to vacancy in the intended place of transfer, a staff member might be granted a transfer. Currently the employees' wards (whose parents are located at Kolkata) are given job-offer outside Kolkata and their chance of coming back to the city is remote. This has created concerns in the minds of staff members that in future even the existing employees in Kolkata might also be instructed to take transfers at far-off sales offices. There

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<sup>29</sup> As per rule, if a temporary staff or sub staff member is employed at a stretch for more than 240 days, then he/she needs to be absorbed a permanent member of the company  
([www.indianexpress.com/res/web/pIe/ie/daily/19980408/09850494.html](http://www.indianexpress.com/res/web/pIe/ie/daily/19980408/09850494.html) - 13k)

are two cases when prospective candidates did not join the company because they were offered job outside Kolkata. Union had to accept management's move in this regard, since rationalization of job has made it extremely difficult to accommodate new employees at Kolkata.

Our survey result shows union members believe that in recruitment related decision, management plays more important role than the union. This is understandable, given that though the overall strategy of how to recruit (through nomination system) is set, however whom to recruit (an important decision from individual employee's point of view) is still co-decided by management. How many individuals to recruit and when to recruit are based on vacancies that come up as and when retirement of an existing employee takes place. Through negotiation with union the unionizable category staff strength is fixed in the entire organization. From 1996, onwards after the early separation scheme (ESS) for employees was introduced across Tata Steel, the focus has shifted to reduction in the staff strength. The recent policy also stipulates that the vacancy that arises due to any unionized category member taking ESS gets abolished. This provision is necessary for availing tax benefits on ESS compensation. Through introduction of multiple rounds of ESS, management has reduced positions in sub-staff positions (peons, office help etc.) considerably. Thus the number of positions available for employees got reduced, and management is perceived as to have an upper hand in deciding new vacancies.

### **Job Assignments**

Job assignment here refers the quality and quantity of tasks assigned to the non-officer cadre employees by superiors. While it is common that in unionized work places, unions have say on job allocation in Tata Steel, job allocation is decided by management. Employees in the same salary structure have different work loads. After introduction of computers, many traditional jobs have become redundant and that has called for restructuring the office organisation. There was a large chamber called typing pool where typists and stenographers used to sit. Majority from this group have taken ESS and the vacant positions were not replaced. Introduction of SAP system (ERP software) has again necessitated changes in work processes and some job shrinkage. When we met the Union President, his remarks was:

*"I always tell my members that they need to understand the changed realities of the present day, be efficient, learn and adapt themselves and they need to take charge of the situation!"*

Though ESS and computerization created uncertainty in the work situation, yet no union member had resigned from the company. From union side, it has been made clear that it is the member's responsibility to retain the current job portfolio by upgrading skills. Almost all the staff members have a PC and have received special training to handle SAP related work. Capable, bright employees in the staff cadre are put in important and responsible positions by management. Though formal performance appraisal is not in place for the staff, yet in job allocation dimension performance and dependability is considered. In this dimension, staff members perceive that management's role is more important than that of the union.

### **Training Facility**

The Human Resource Department at Tata Centre has yearly training man days target and they take onus to select trainees, decide on training methodology etc. There are also instances where both management and union representatives jointly attended seminars, conferences or training programmes. The white collar members perceive that union directed training programme is insignificant and it is mainly management that takes major initiatives for skill enhancement of the staff members. Several authors (Walters, 1995; Singh and Mohanty, 2001) showed that training and development related area is supposed to become an issue of greater priority for all trade unions, especially in an era where skill set of earlier period is increasingly becoming obsolete. TEU doesn't have much scope to contribute in the skill enhancement of its members, since management takes a proactive role here.

In the company wide quality initiative policies (quality circle, suggestion box scheme, six sigma initiative, quality improvement projects) staff members can participate. However neither from management's side, nor from the union's side major thrust is given to encourage staff members to take part. As a result of which except very few individuals, majority of the staff members are passive about quality initiatives. Union can take a proactive role in this area also and help members to be active participants in the company.

### **B. FINANCIAL DIMENSIONS**

The question on financial dimension essentially captures all monetary benefits (like basic salary, Dearness Allowance (DA), Traveling Allowance (TA), housing, transportation, and annual bonus) that non-officer category employees enjoy. As seen from exhibit 1 in financial decision also, management takes upper hand than union – as per the members' attitude.

**Salary, Bonus, Other benefits (DA, Housing, Transportation & Tiffin Allowances)**

Tata Employees Union<sup>30</sup> on its own put charter of demand on salary and allied benefits for all office employees (except for Jamshedpur office employees<sup>31</sup>) and negotiates with management. Only in the case of LTC and Bonus, JWU is the sole bargaining agent with the management and negotiated benefit, determined jointly by management and JWU, become applicable in the entire unionized employee base. For unionized members, pay is based on seniority, rather than performance. There's no incentive scheme in practice for white collar employees. Overtime payment for extra work, which was earlier given, has been removed as an entitlement 3-4 years back<sup>32</sup>. TEU was against overtime payment since the very beginning, because according to union leaders interests of collectives are more important than an individual. Given the bleak employment scenario, union strongly supports that instead of multitasking and extended work by one worker, it is important that more number of workers do the available job.

Till 2002, staff members were eligible for double increment based on their "excellent performance". In Tata Steel in the staff cadre there is no performance benchmark, so, this "excellent performance" was based on management's discretion<sup>33</sup>. This led to some discontent and subsequently, double increment payment was taken away and instead "SHABASHI system" (encouragement scheme) came into existence. Here, for exemplary performance, a staff member is entitled for a one time cash prize which might range from Rs. 200/- to Rs.5000/-. Thus "SHABASHI" is a one time payment. Double increment awarded each year, raised the fixed salary of the employee and its benefits used to accrue for life time, both in direct payment and long term retirement benefits. Union did not interfere when double increment got replaced by SHABASHI, since from union's point of view the double increment was not a negotiated benefit but management largesse. However, now the union has demanded for "SHABASHI" be made at least comparable with the benefit of double increment. Till date, no change has been agreed to.

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<sup>30</sup> Tata Workers' Union, Jamshedpur together with the union of Steel Authority of India jointly negotiate with management and determines salary and allied benefits (medical facilities, leave, weekly off, DA, Basic, HRA, Tiffin Allowance, Transport Subsidy, Annual increment, Night Shift Allowance, Shift Duty allowances, Special allowances for supervisors, protection of existing benefits) for workers of both Tata Steel and SAIL in the presence of government under National Joint Consultative Committee on Steel.

<sup>31</sup> Jamshedpur office employees salary and other allied benefits get determined by JWU.

<sup>32</sup> As per the information given by the President of Tata Employees' Union

<sup>33</sup> This discretion might vary between staying back in the office after office hours to some visible achievement.



Staff members in our survey perceived that there's no major difference between the influence of union in comparison with management, in deciding the salary structure. For determining annual bonus (statutory under Payment of Bonus Act 1965<sup>34</sup>) our survey shows that staff members believe that management plays more important role than union. Only with exceptions of very few years, Tata Steel always has paid 20% of annual salary, the maximum bonus allowable<sup>35</sup>.

A staff member's reaction of how bonus gets determined is that:

*"Our union here does not have to fight against management to get our bonus."*

### **Medical Facilities**

For all employees and employee dependants<sup>36</sup>, Tata Steel provides full medical assistance. The interaction with the staff members made it clear that one of the major reasons for their continuing job with this organization, is this medical support. There are concerns at certain corners of the employees that management might curb some of the existing facilities of medical benefits, as a measure of cost cutting exercise. Our survey shows from employees' point of view both management and union is viewed to effect the medical facility provision. While management's superior decision making role on determining medical facilities is understandable, perhaps employees believe that pressures for reduction in the existing facility would be (has been) retaliated by the union, and hence they perceive union as equally determining the medical benefits.

### **C. ADMINISTRATIVE DIMENSIONS**

Administrative dimension captures workplace arrangements affecting quality of work (such as seating and lighting arrangements, working hours etc.) available to the white collar employees. Here also, the members perceive that in deciding working condition, management takes more role than the union. The above finding also indicates the shift in perception of union's role, traditionally from demanding basic hygiene factors from the managements who saw it as an additional cost head, to the natural role fulfillment of management if they have to keep a productive workforce.

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<sup>34</sup> <http://labour.nic.in/act/acts/pba.doc>

<sup>35</sup> One of the major reasons for Industrial Disputes in India is dispute over bonus determination.

<sup>36</sup> Spouse along with the existing employee are entitled for lifelong medical treatment. Dependent Son Upto 25 years and unmarried daughter (no age limit) are eligible for medical facility.

## Seating Arrangements

The office of Tata Centre is centrally air-conditioned, with modern state of the art seating and lighting arrangements. A union representative replied: “*Virtually everything (as far as seating arrangements, office décor etc. is concerned) is decided by Management*”.

All the office renovation activities are carried out by Administration Department; hence union has no need to take any initiative as far as workplace décor is concerned. Earlier officers used to sit in separate chambers, and this used to serve as symbolic partition between management and staff members. However, now in majority of the floors of Tata Centre (such as Accounts Department, Flat and Long Products Department, Ferro Alloys and Minerals Division) officers are not given separate cubicles. They share the same floor space with the staff members. Even the traditional distinction between different cadres of employees by different qualities and sizes of chairs has been abolished. Same quality of chair is used by both officers and staff members. Earlier officers and staff members used to have separate canteen facilities in the same floor. From 2007 the two canteens are merged into one and the same canteen facility is being used by both staff members and officers. (However, there are still separate lavatories for male officers and male staff members<sup>37</sup>). All these administrative arrangements show management is trying to bridge the power distance between staff members and officers and this move has been perceived positively by the staff members. Administration department substitutes for certain traditional union functions.

## Working Hours

In the office of Tata Steel mutually agreed working hours is eight hours a day, with Saturday<sup>38</sup> and Sunday as off days. Staff members are entitled for ten days casual leaves and one month privilege leave with pay. Apart from these there is furlough leave of three months, which employees are entitled to enjoy or encash after every seven years. Some of the staff members however believe that the leaves are on paper entitlements only, in reality they do not avail it. Often some staff members stay back in the office, even much long time after the official hours, without any overtime payment. They believe that longer hours stay in the office would be counted as “hard work”, in the eyes of the management<sup>39</sup>. Our study reflects

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<sup>37</sup> The toilets for lady officers and lady staff members are the same. The reason might be ladies are comparatively still lesser in number.

<sup>38</sup> Closing office on Saturdays was mutually agreed upon by management and union in 1963

<sup>39</sup> As mentioned in the Financial Dimensions section, one of the unofficial criteria for getting SHABASHI might be long time staying back in the office. Some of the staff members believe staying back for long time in the office would put them in the good book of the managers and would help them in future.

staff members' belief that it is management who decides their working hours, rather than the union.

#### **D. LONG TERM CAREER RELATED DIMENSIONS**

Long term career dimension refers to promotion opportunities, and job security. In these dimensions, except for job security, management is perceived as to take major role.

##### **Furtherance of career**

There was understanding between management and union that no member can be promoted to officer cadre (non-union category) without prior permission from the union. But recently the situation has changed. There are six cases where staff promotions to officer grade took place, without any formal negotiation. Union President's reaction to promotion cases is:

*"Promotion brings new hopes and aspirations amongst the members , however promotees' loyalty still remains with the union. For example, if I have to negotiate salary rise with my erstwhile member, I believe he/she would be more empathetic".*

Though promotions from non- officer cadre are being allowed, yet as one manager (IL4) commented to us:

*"I cannot foresee the staff promotees to move up to major decision making levels. From IL5, they might go maximum up to IL4 level, not more than that!"*

We were also told that discussions are in the process where union is contemplating requesting management for a new entry level officer cadre (IL6) which would help to promote bright staff members. Union is taking this initiative even at the cost of possibility of lesser membership base, if the positions vacated are not filled. Changing aspiration need of white collar segment is enabling union to become employee-cause champion, even at the cost of loosing some of its long standing members.

Our survey results shows that staff members considers that management holds major role in career and promotion related decisions. These positive perceptions have also resulted in positive organization (employer) directed behaviour like the willingness to stay back in office without overtime, accept more responsibilities, desire to move up the hierarchy and be part of decision making group and accepting managements' decisions more easily.

## Early Separation

In the history of Tata Steel, it was rare when a staff member willingly resigned from the company. The change started since 1996, when ESS was introduced and many workers amicably left their jobs with benefits. Union had to accept this move, understanding the competitive forces in the market, cost pressures etc. As one staff member recalls when the ESS got introduced the reaction of the then union president was:

*“Management has put forth a very strong wall in front of us, and I am sorry my friends, we have no ability to remove this wall.....”*

Management circulated the information about ESS throughout works, mines, and collieries, and Marketing Divisions of Tata Steel. Initially both unions vehemently objected to ESS and forbade its members from accepting. They cited the existence of an ongoing computer agreement whereby, only after 2001, change of manpower strength could have been discussed. However soon the realization came that the situation around is fast changing and even a section of staff members in Kolkata and branch offices wanted to opt for ESS. As result of organisational restructuring, all the warehouses had become redundant and closed down, hence considerable number of employees (both unionized and officers)<sup>40</sup> became surplus. Similarly introduction of new technology saw redundancies in the plant side.

Under this condition union had no other choice but to accept the phase wise introduction of ESS and reduction of strength, thrice. The survey result shows that employees perceive in deciding about ESS, management had major role to play, than the union. Our interaction with some members reveals that they believe union definitely plays an important role in deciding the benefits to be offered to the early separated employees and hence its relevance continues. However, there is some discontent among members. As one member points out:

*“When for the first time ESS got introduced we were offered Rs. 2 lakh interest-free loans at a time, now in the last ESS it was only Rs. 1.5 lakhs and that too under three installments” .*

Staff members' expect union would protect the existing ESS benefits and would ensure even if in future, ESS is again floated the same and possibly better level of benefits are offered to the existing employees.

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<sup>40</sup> Officers in some of the instances are also offered ESS, and in some of the cases forced to resign.

## Job Security

In job security dimension, union has got the highest perceptual support from members than the management. For members of TEU, who represent lower-middle class & middle-middle class, job security is essential. A typical response from a staff member is:

*“With my qualification and background, I could have opted for a better position in some other organization outside this city. However I have to support my son, who is very young, and cannot leave my present job here”.*

Job security is a necessary requirement for majority of staff members at their late forties, who work in the office. For them union membership means “ticket” to a secured job, even if that means losing out on career front, or higher job opportunities outside Tata Steel and the city.

At the same time we noticed the counter trend also. A young employee in the staff-cadre, who is currently pursuing his higher studies in management, responded:

*“I sometimes feel like following Mr. X (another employee) who recently left to join a better position outside. I would also resign. I am just waiting my MBA to be finished and waiting for my luck!”*

A section of sub-staff members (peons, office bearers) fear that some of the existing jobs might be outsourced to contractors and this might entail further job shrinkages. For sub-staff members (who lack formal education) job security is extremely important, since they don't have any alternative opportunity<sup>41</sup> and require union's support. Our informal interaction with the sub-staff members' revealed that they believe that union is not keen on protecting the job security of this section. The reason for this might be union's realization in management's lines of thought<sup>42</sup> that that these jobs are redundant.

Recently there were three cases of exit from the office at the staff level. The younger lot is more mobile and ready for experimentation. The India growth story also provides ample opportunities for talent to avail growth opportunities. Hence, for how long members would bank on union just for job security also needs to be explored.

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<sup>41</sup> Majority of the sub-staff members, who opted for ESS hailed from Bihar and Orissa and after their separation from the company, they went back to their native places to either involve themselves in farming activities or entrepreneurial and business ventures.

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.tata.com/0\\_our\\_commitment/employee\\_relations/articles/20050121\\_tatasteel\\_vrs.htm](http://www.tata.com/0_our_commitment/employee_relations/articles/20050121_tatasteel_vrs.htm)

## **E. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT DIMENSIONS**

Emotional support dimension refers to when in psychological need for support, who the members turn to. As can be conjectured from the other sections, it might not be surprising to find that union members feel they receive more support from management than from the union.

### **Voicing concern**

The fundamental question as to who join unions has been answered theoretically by proposing that union is the collective voice of employees. Naturally, members have to be more comfortable with unions than management. But our survey result shows that staff members feel more comfortable to place their concerns directly in front of management, rather than to the union to take up the issues. The reason for this confidence in management might be multifold, we point out two prime reasons for the situation. Firstly, Tata Steel's human resource management policy is very sound and progressive (Including that Tata Steel was the first to introduce various employee welfare schemes in India much ahead of introduction of the same by Govt. of India as Law)(see **Appendix 2**). Secondly, this confidence shows the choice of employees who seek furtherance of career and does not feel distinct from management.

### **Personal Problems**

Our survey result shows union members believe while solving any "individual problem", also management takes major role. This is different than what we had expected in terms of conventional wisdom about unions. Joseph(1991) has classified alienation of working classes, first as fundamental and second as peripheral. The fundamental alienation arises because of the system of wage labor which is the instrument of the expropriation of surplus value for private enterprises or for the state. Peripheral alienation refers to the socio-psychological powerlessness, self estrangement, cultural estrangement, normlessness and meaninglessness. By joining a union, members reduce their peripheral alienation. However fundamental alienation becomes greater, when workers amongst themselves cherish "we" feelings, and employer side becomes "they". While in the case of Tata Steel this "we, the staff members" and "they, the management" distinction still prevail to some extent, yet this distinction still doesn't lead to complete alienation of the staff members from management. Historical confidence built by sound people management practices of Tata Steel and management initiatives, particularly the power distance reducing initiatives has built confidence of

workers. In addition, the management also treats union as an integral part of the organization's work process, and gives it what is due. Thus there is limited incentive to propagate "we – they" feeling.

## **UNION RELATED DIMENSION**

The survey shows in the areas of leadership, communication, co-ordination of union activities and attitude of union leadership, performance is perceived by members as satisfactory.

### **Dual Loyalty of Members: Unions and Management in same boat.**

In any union, the loyalty of members to the union is significant. Union loyalty of members is determined by union's ability to address both outcome-based (pay, working hours, job security aspect) and process-based aspects (voicing concerns, union representatives communication and leadership ability) of members' concerns. Some early studies suggested that loyalty to the union and the employer were mutually exclusive attitudes (Dean, 1954). However, later studies reveal the concept of "dual loyalty". Bain and Price (1983) believe that employer attitude and behavior significantly influence workers' choice to become and remain union members. Our study points out that staff member are more loyal to management, than to the union.

Earlier studies (Berger et al., 1983; Bluen and Zwam, 1987; Premack and Hunter, 1988) showed workers' propensity to unionize is significantly related to their dissatisfaction with various facets of the job. However, Guest and Dewe (1988) questioned this dissatisfaction aspect, by stating that "there are conceptual problems in using job dissatisfaction to explain continued union membership, as opposed to union joining, since, logically, the reasons for union membership disappear if the sources of dissatisfaction are removed". What we started believing from our study is that in order to reduce the dissatisfaction, members still depend on management, however to ensure job security and insurance against other unforeseen situations, they take the recourse of union. Hence union membership is a ticket for "reduction of risk", and management is the recourse for furtherance of aspirations. Overall our study captures that there's a need of changing role of union in the white collar segment.

## **UNION IMPERATIVES FOR FUTURE: IMPLICATIONS**

Overall, union is still perceived as effective in employees' life, because it still provides the highest value added service that members' perceive as most important, such as, job security.

As Shyam Sundar (2005) pointed out, union's role as an employee-cause negotiator would remain, may be unions have to be more flexible than its earlier orientation. Thus our study of members' perceptions has implications for union organizing and how unions can work to being relevant for its constituents.

From the union organizing and sustaining perspective, it is necessary that unions understand that their members do engage in exhibiting dual loyalty. While in the traditional framework of unions, such dual loyalty exhibition may be looked down, in the current context the same should be viewed as expression of satisfaction of the multifaceted aspirations of its members. Unions that understand the changed perceptions and reformulate its approaches will be successful in making valuable contribution to its members, organisations and the society.

Some of the union imperatives arising out of this study are discussed below:

*Firstly*, in training related dimension, union needs to take a more proactive role. Whenever skill redundancy would happen (which is going to be very frequent), union has to take the role of the facilitator who would ensure the skill up-gradation of the workforce. As has happened in the case under study, when computer system first got introduced in Tata Centre, both management and union sat together to discuss how to upgrade the skill level. Union might be required to analyze gap between the need of the members and the provisions of corporate HR services and try to fill up the "vacuum".

*Secondly*, as Mamkoottam(2003)'s study shows unions, in majority of the cases were not aware about the nature of the change that is going to be introduced in the workplace. In order to lead the employees cause from the front it is imperative that union has adequate knowledge of both labour laws and keep themselves abreast of the current situation. Our study findings show there's a considerable leadership vacuum and improvement opportunities in communication and co-ordination both between workers-union and union-management.

*Thirdly*, in their study Katz, Kuruville and Turner (1993) showed one of the characteristics of weak union is low knowledge base of the workers. Members support does not mean the token money that members pay as their union membership. Members support does imply that members understand their legitimate rights, communicate their problems or concerns to union, and actively debate over issues of concern. Existing unions might like to encourage its unionized member to actively debate over issues of concern, even if it means critiquing the



approach of existing union. Some of the meetings of union that one of the authors could attend saw passive acceptance of union executives' views by the staff members. If union encourages that members bring forth even controversies in the meetings, this would help union to identify issues of concerns before it goes beyond their hands.

*Fourthly*, in the executive committee of union, there is zero representation from female staff members. The participation of female staff members in the regular union meetings is also low. One of the reasons for this low participation might be that most of the union meetings are done after office hours. Though union tried to address this low participation of women staff members once<sup>43</sup>, however there is scope for union to actively encourage women staff members to participate and represent themselves in union related activities. This assumes significance as women participation in service jobs in India is on the rise.

*Finally*, Cohn and Lindberg (1984) pointed out the concerns of employees in white collar segment are lack of promotion opportunities, exclusion from decision making, problem of supervision, unclear job definition, inability of employees to express angers, unsupportive supervisors, low pay, repetitive work. In the case of TEU the union has already recognized changed aspirations of its member and has provided support. They have agreed to promotion of staff members to officer grade and work for more opportunities to be created, even at the cost of immediate dip in membership.

## **LIMITATION OF THE PAPER**

This is a study in an office set up, and based on this study one cannot generalize the trend, as prevalent in the country. We have not followed statistically validated sample. However, the study does show a pointer to the discussion for future strategic imperatives for union leaders. Never ever in the company, union members got surveyed to understand their attitude about union leaders or union's move. In this regard this is a one off study. We hope in future union might like to carry out their members' opinion to put a self check on the union's progress and relevance.

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<sup>43</sup> Discussion with female staff member showed union once called a meeting with all female colleagues to understand their apathy towards union. However after that no major initiative has been taken from union's side.

## CONCLUSION

Our study substantiates Dean(1954)'s point of view that it is not necessarily that workers need to choose sides between management and union. In this case employees have favorable attitude towards both management and union, thus exhibiting dual loyalty. The reason for such a situation in the particular organization might be that the office setup we have chosen is having comparatively lesser history of conflict between management and union. Though our study shows that as perceived by staff members, union's role is currently lesser as compared to management in certain areas (recruitment decision, job allocation, skill enhancement decision, monetary benefits) , yet one of the major roles of union still lies in the protection of the employees' tenure. For the white collar, middle class segment, job protection is the most important factor and in the growing uncertainty when employee separation schemes are floating around, union has major role to play in this area. At the same time, we also propose that there is substantial scope for further improvement of union acceptability in terms of enhanced communication, co-ordination and leadership. Management is actively trying to bridge the power distance between staff members and officers by proactively providing benefits, hence challenge lies for union to be relevant by actively championing employees' skill enhancement, job enrichment and thereby being relevant in the aspiring white collar employee segment. Overall pushing management towards a more employee prone inclusivist strategy itself shows a success of union.

**APPENDIX-1****Objective of Tata Employees Union**

“The union should strive to improve and ameliorate the condition of its members and to safeguard their interests by negotiations with the employers and only in the last resort, by strikes. It shall, provide its funds permit and the general body of members approve of

1.
  - a. Undertake prosecution or defense of any legal proceeding to which any of its members may be a party of the purpose of protecting the rights of the member arising out of his relation with his employer.
  - b. Conduct a trade dispute on behalf of a member.
  - c. Compensate members for loss arising out of a trade dispute or whose interests have been damaged by reason of their services to the Union.
  - d. Pay allowances to a member or his dependants on account of death, old age, sickness, accidents or unemployment of the member.
  - e. Issue or undertake liability under policies of assurances on the life of a member or policies insuring a member against sickness, accident or unemployment, and
  - f. Start for member a Library, a night school, a club and institution for medical treatment and free supply of medicines benefit fund providing financial assistance.
2. To maintain an official organ for publishing the activities of the Union and disseminating information about various inequalities and disabilities under which the member to their work and other conditions of service and to foster relation with the workers of other concerns.
3. To raise and establish separate funds, as and when necessary, for the furtherance of the objects of the union.

To federate with or affiliate itself to any other Association, Union or Society in India and outside, having kindred aims and objectives”.

**Source:** Internal official document of Tata Employees Union *on Rules and Constitution of The Tata Employees Union.*

## APPENDIX-2

## Tata Steel's Labor Welfare Measures

Tata Steel's initiatives	Introduction in Tata Steel	Enforced by Law	Subsequent Legal Measures
Eight-hour working day	1912	1948	Factories Act
Free medical aid	1915	1948	Employee Sate Insurance Act
Establishment of Welfare Department	1917	1948	Factories Act
Schooling facilities for children	1917		
Formation of Works Committee for handling complaints, service conditions and grievances	1919	1947	Industrial Disputes Act
Leave with pay	1920	1948	Factories Act
Workers' provident fund scheme	1920	1952	Employees' PF
Workmen's accident compensation scheme	1920	1924	Workmen's Compensation Act
Technical institute for training of apprentices, craftsmen & Engineering Graduates	1921	1961	Apprentices Act
Maternity Benefit	1928	1946	Bihar Maternity Benefit
Profit Sharing Bonus	1934	1965	Bonus Act
Ex-gratia payments for road accidents while coming to or returning from duty	1979		
Social Audit	1980	-	First in India
Pension Scheme	1989	-	

**Source:** Elankumaran, Seal, & Hashmi (2005)

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