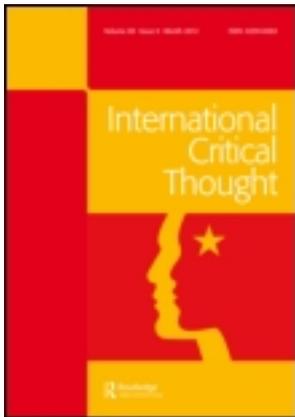


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“Union Regimes”: Discipline and Punish in Three Indian Maritime Trade Unions

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This critical study stands at the intersection of two prominent themes within the studies of industrial relations and the sociology of labour respectively, namely, the decline, renewal, and transformation of trade unionism in the context of neoliberal globalization on the one hand, and labour process theories pertaining specifically to labour discipline/control on the other. Illustrated with ethnographic snapshots of three prominent maritime trade unions in India, this paper conceptualizes the “union regime”—a labour disciplinary regime based on the trade union’s perceptual and attitudinal conditioning of its members, which ends chiefly in benefiting the employers and the unions. Furthermore, the paper describes the specific mechanisms of union disciplining from a Foucauldian theoretical perspective. The complicity of trade unions in the “discipline and punish” of the very workers that they represent leads to the alarming speculation that, at the perplexing crossroads of transformation, trade unionism is at the risk of becoming an extension of the ideological arsenal of global capitalism.

Keywords: trade union; labour discipline; seafarer; India; neoliberalism

Introduction

This study stands at the intersection of two prominent themes within industrial relations research and the sociology of labour respectively: on the one hand, the decline, renewal, and transformation of trade unionism in the context of neoliberal globalization, and on the other hand, labour process theories pertaining specifically to labour discipline/control.

It is commonly observed that neoliberal globalization and its attendant socio-economic developments have had serious adverse impacts on organized labour worldwide (Harvey 2005). This has provoked a considerable amount of discussions, both academic and otherwise, regarding the survival and renewal of the trade union movement (Hickey, Kuruvilla, and Lakhani 2010). While various theories and propositions have been put forward with a view of reinvigorating trade unionism, there seems to be a general consensus that trade unions are increasingly forced to make concessions and compromises to the employers in a hegemonic neoliberal global environment.

This notwithstanding, in the Western (or loosely the “global north”) context where the traditions of industrial democracy and social justice are more deeply entrenched, the mutations of trade unionism in adverse directions can be regarded as limited from the outset. In contrast, in those developing economies where the market-driven developmental imperative is upheld paramount, there are inevitably more causes for concern that trade unions might lose their critical character and even become actively involved in the discipline and control of the very labour

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which they are supposed to champion. Based on ethnographic data empirically collected on three maritime trade unions representing Indian seafarers working or seeking employment in a highly globalized shipping industry, this paper endeavours to conceptualize and describe the disciplinary functions exercised by trade unions on their members to suit the interests of employers. Apart from articulating the labour discipline function of trade unionism in the context of a developing economy, the paper further offers insights into the varied mechanisms of trade union disciplining and their effects on the union members, using a Foucauldian perspective on identity/subjectivity and power/discipline.

Decline, Renewal and Transformation: The Trade Union Story

“Decline” and “renewal” have been two keywords in the Anglophone literature on trade unions in the past decade. Owing to a plethora of factors generally attributed to the neoliberal globalization of world economies, trade union membership densities across the Anglo-American countries experienced significant declines between the 1960s and 1990s, in some cases by as much as half (Fairbrother and Yates 2003, 12–13). That the UK union density dropped from well over 50% in 1979 to below 30% in 1998 is a widely cited fact (de Turberville 2004; Terry 2003; Waddington and Kerr 2000; Machin 2000). Even in continental European countries where strongly-rooted social democratic values and institutions meant a lesser degree of neoliberal hegemony, trade unions nevertheless face severe challenges; and in many cases notable declines in union densities have also been recorded since the 1990s (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000). Kuruvilla et al. (2002) further observe that in general, trade unions in Asia have similarly suffered declines during the 1990s, in addition to their relatively weak influences in these economies in the first place.

Caught in such a universal disarray, various “renewal” strategies have been proposed and experimented with by both practitioners and industrial relations scholars, with a view of stemming the decline. For example, mergers and amalgamations (M&A) have been pursued by some unions from different sectors to consolidate strength (Griffin and Fairbrother 2002); shifting from the “servicing model” to the “organizing model” with an emphasis on rank-and-file activism has been a popular and widely influential theory (Fairbrother and Yates 2003; Bronfenbrenner and Juravich 1998; Fairbrother 1996); and some believe that a social “field enlargement” (Heery 2005, 101) is required to rejuvenate trade unionism (Schenk 2003).

Despite these, in reality, a wide-spread scepticism has come to overshadow these efforts. Union M&A strategy is said to have often created “strange bedfellows” (Fairbrother and Griffin 2002, 242) that are not complementary; just as the Australian experience indicates that “amalgamation did not prove to be the hoped-for mechanism to reverse declining unionisation” (Griffin, Small, and Svensen 2003, 84). De Turberville (2004) doubts the adequacy of the “organizing model” as a renewal strategy, which is echoed by Hickey, Kuruvilla, and Lakhani (2010), which questions the presumed link between member activism and union renewal. Opinions on the “Social (Movement) Unionism” range from the general reservation held by Griffin and Fairbrother (2002) and Robinson (2002) to the utter disillusionment expressed by rank-and-file union activists (Shantz 2009). Empirical examinations from both Britain (Terry 2003; Kelly 2004) and Russia (Ashwin 2004) have also echoed Kelly’s (1996, 1998) argument that the attempt to redefine the role of trade unionism as “social partnership” might be little more than a euphemism for unions’ acquiescence, if not “complete sellout” (Ashwin 2004). McIlroy’s following statement regarding trade unionism under the late “New Labour” era (1997–2010) in Britain may serve as a useful indicator of the general state of trade unionism in the industrialized world:

Unions would be rehabilitated so long as they restructured their ideology, politics and activity. They would be reborn as labour market *lubricators*, as *agents of supply-side neoliberalism* doing the work of New Labour and the market inside the enterprise. They would foster employee identification with management and prosecute the goals of the business. They would contribute to harmonious employment relations as vehicles to increase competitiveness, help to attract investment and institutionalize lifelong learning and “the knowledge economy.” (McIlroy 2009, 80; emphasis added)

The upshot seems to be that trade unions have struggled to renew themselves in order to cope with the sea changes in labour markets and employment relations in new circumstances, but do not seem to have found really effective ways of doing so; instead, they found themselves at the perplexing crossroads as to how they will transform to remain relevant. As alluded to in the literature, it is at this perplexing juncture of transformation that pragmatic imperatives may compel trade unions to make concessions and compromises that can potentially undermine trade unions’ fundamental critical identity as the representative and champion of labour, and to cross over to the “enemy’s side,” so to speak, and become the collaborators of the employer/management. This leads to the issue of labour discipline.

Labour Process and Discipline

The study of labour is a classic branch of sociology stretching right back to the canonical works of Durkheim, Marx and Weber (O’Doherty and Willmott 2009), and occupies a strategic place in critical thoughts and theories. For this paper, nonetheless, the sub-theme that is relevant is what Thompson (1983, 1989) has termed the “control imperative,” by which he means the necessity and urgency recognized by employer/management to “erect structures of control over labour” (Littler 1982, 31). The specific forms of control can be various but according to O’Doherty and Willmott (2009), Burawoy’s (1979, 1985) seminal theorizing of “factory regimes” has drawn scholarly attention to the *ideological* aspect of worker control/discipline and the issue of subjectivity. Since Burawoy’s ideas have been reviewed extensively by others elsewhere (see literature review sections of Degiuli and Kollmeyer 2007; Nichols et al. 2004; Pun and Smith 2007), here I only discuss several recent empirical studies which are particularly relevant to this study.

Two interesting and important studies are those by Nichols et al. (2004) and Pun and Smith (2007). Drawing on Burawoy, the study of Nichols et al. sheds light on the specific forms of “factory regimes” operant in large white goods manufacturing plants in China, South Korea and Taiwan. Echoing Burawoy, they point out that labour control and discipline in “factory regimes” is often a mixture and balance of coercion and consensus. Coercion is the more straightforward aspect of labour discipline, and is commonly achieved through bureaucratic procedures such as investigation (e.g., Cooke 2006), followed by various punitive actions, including, ultimately, dismissal (Klaas, Brown, and Heneman III 1998). Pun and Smith’s (2007) study on the “dormitory labour regime” also mainly deals with the coercive aspect of labour control. However, through examining the worker dormitories attached to two Chinese garment manufacturing plants, they show how factory dormitories enable an intensified discipline and exploitation of labour through a “spatial politics” (Pun and Smith 2007, 27) which further disempowers the workers. In other words, Pun and Smith look at the reproductive regime of labour found in these two Chinese factories.

Compared to coercion, the “manufacturing of consent” (Burawoy 1979) is arguably even more effective in labour control, in which case the cooperation elicited from labour becomes voluntary. In other words, compared with physical and coercive measures, it is the *perceptual* or *attitudinal (re-)conditioning* of labour that seems to occupy an even more prominent role in the disciplining of labour. Many newfangled management concepts had been critically regarded

as facilitating this very form of discipline. For instance, the “teamwork” model effects surveillance while ostensibly affording workers more autonomy (Sewell 1998); worker “empowerment” through “collective decision-making” incentivises workers to think and behave along the managerial lines and interests (Stewart et al. 2004). Because these strategies aim at eliciting commitment from the workers through creating new workplace cultures and worker attitudes, this form of control is also called “cultural control” (Nichols et al. 2004, 666). More recently, based on the Gramscian conception of ideological hegemony, Degiuli and Kollmeyer (2007) reveal how management induces cooperation and commitment from temporary workers in Italy mainly through ideological means, by normalizing the practice of temporary employment and making workers internalize the idea that it will lead to permanent employment and career advancement.

With the theoretical emphasis thus shifted from the physical/coercive onto the ideological/consensual, it is not implausible to extend the trope of “factory/dormitory regime” to envisage a “union regime,” since compared with the management, trade unions are arguably in a more intimate position to exert influence on the attitudes and perceptions of workers. Burawoy (1979) in his classic study has already demonstrated how the trade union in an American factory could be involved in the discipline of labour. Along this critical line of thought, this paper further furnishes an empirical case-study of trade union discipline found in the contemporary Indian maritime sector.

Background: Seafaring, India, and Trade Unions

Maritime shipping is often argued to be the most globalized of all contemporary industries (Glen 2008; Sampson 2003, 2004). Following the advent of the “Flag of Convenience” (FOC) system in the latter half of the 20th century (Metaxas 1985), which encouraged the practice of global sourcing of cheap seafaring labour, developing countries such as the Philippines and India (currently the No. 1 and 2 world seafarer suppliers) have become significant players and, often indeed, competitors at that. India has historically been an important maritime labour supply nation (Desai 1940). At present, the total population of Indian seafarers is estimated at 150,000 (Yang 2010b), with less than one-third of them being *officers* (i.e., relatively highly skilled and experienced personnel holding senior positions onboard vessels) and the rest, two-thirds strong, being *ratings* (i.e., seafarers with lower skill/experience levels occupying lesser positions on ships). For both the officer and rating categories, it is also estimated that only less than one-third are involved in Indian domestic (i.e., coastal) shipping, while all the rest participates in the global seafaring labour pool. It is important to note that the world maritime industry is presently experiencing a *shortage* of qualified officers and, in contrast, a gross *oversupply* of ratings. While the exact magnitude of this shortage/oversupply is often disputed, Yang’s (2010a) account of the experience of job-seeking ratings in *the* main Indian maritime city (“City M”) illustrates that, at least in the Indian setting, an oversupply of ratings and a strong demand for officers are lived realities.

Thanks to a liberal political climate under which trade unionism generally thrives (Candland 2001), there are more than a dozen seafaring unions in India. But three major ones among them dominate the “scene”: Union A (UA), B (UB) and C (UC) (pseudonyms). UA and UB primarily represent ratings whereas UC exclusively represents officers. They claim total memberships of 80,000, 19,000, and 15,000, respectively. UA is the most established of the three, and is rumoured to be the “richest” trade union in the entire subcontinent. Tracing its origins to over a century ago, UA is now a powerful institution with vast influences in the sector and beyond, which explains what might be described as an air of formidability that surrounds the union and its leaders. UB, on the other hand, is a self-proclaimed Marxist union with political affiliation to the Communist Party in India. Although tracing its origin to the 1950s, UB has become a significant player only in the past two decades after gaining a foothold in City M, which was previously monopolized by UA. At present, although UB is fast growing, its influence is still relatively limited, and

its members are drawn primarily from seafarers working in Indian domestic shipping. To some extent this has to do with the union's more militant style of operation, though in the past decade the union has toned down its militancy significantly. Nevertheless, UB prides itself on its egalitarian and grassroots ethos, and denounces UA for being a "bogus union" not genuinely interested in seafarers' wellbeing. Not unexpectedly, UA and UB perceive each other as their arch rival. Lastly, UC dates back to the 1930s and is the only union in India representing maritime officers. Yet, due to the favourable market condition to the employees, the union in recent years has become relatively "quiet" if not somewhat irrelevant.

Research Methods and Fieldwork

The fieldwork of this study was conducted over a period of two months in 2009–10 during which I stayed in City M, the major coastal metropolis and maritime hub of India. The methods used in data collection were chiefly that of interview and ethnographic observation. Interview questions were mainly directed at eliciting the identity and ideology discourses of the three trade unions, and this generated rich data pertaining to the relationships between the unions and their members. A total of 34 tape-recorded interviews were collected, spread more or less equally across the unions. In all three cases, interviews were obtained mainly from union officials, and this reflects the passivity of membership vis-à-vis the leadership and can be regarded as a manifestation of the prominence of hierarchy in Indian culture. In addition, ethnographic observations were conducted when opportunities arose. For example, on my first visit to UA, I was invited to observe a weekly session in which the union General Secretary would meet and talk to job-seeking seafarers; later on, I was also invited to attend one of UA's monthly "Trade Union Workshops." Occasions such as these afforded me the opportunities to gain deeper insights into the organization's culture than interview data alone could afford. Next, selectively using both the interview and ethnographic data, I describe the disciplinary regimes found in the three unions respectively.

The Union Regimes

Union A: "You are just not good enough!"

In UA, the discipline exercised on its members is often less than subtle. As mentioned earlier, a long history, wealth, and powerfulness have made UA a formidable organization not only to outsiders like myself, but also to its own members. The leaders of UA seem to show relatively few signs of identification with ordinary union members, and the deference the latter pays to the former provides them with powerful means through which discipline is enforced.

Throughout my research stint, whenever I visited UA, I noticed that a few dozen young men would always be waiting outside the union's three-storey purpose-built house. They dressed themselves in leather shoes, office trousers and shirts, some even carrying briefcases; but they were in fact anxious job-seeking "trainee seafarers" (Yang 2010a) who had come to the union in order to meet the General Secretary (GS), in the hope that the powerful GS would become sympathetic and give them recommendation letters for securing jobs. Whenever the GS entered or left the union building, these young men would spring to their feet and line up neatly as if they were soldiers awaiting inspection; when the GS passed in front of them, they were quick to salute in their subtle body language and say "sir!" The GS, however, was always busy, and only called in these job-seeking seafarers once a week to speak with them very briefly.

My first visit to UA fell on a day when such an audience was to be held, and I was allowed to observe the process. The audience lasted for about two hours, and altogether six batches of seafarers, each consisting of seven or eight of them, were called in and spoken to. Throughout the

session, the GS's attitude could be described as indifferent and, at moments, condescending, while those seamen looked just equally intimidated and deferential. The GS often appeared impatient in listening and talking, and when the phone or his mobile rang, as they did quite often, he would straightaway pick up, leaving the seaman who was speaking rather awkwardly hanging halfway, not knowing whether to continue or not.

In fact, on the whole, he did not speak much with them; but it is interesting that whenever he did, there was a discernible effort on his part in constructing the seafarers as inadequate and incompetent potential employees. For example, because I spoke little of the local tongue, at the beginning of the session, the GS ordered everybody to speak in English for my benefit. As English is the obligatory working language of international seafaring, most seafarers could somehow cope. But to those who could not and slipped back into the vernacular, the GS would impatiently say: "English! Your English! You can't even speak English properly how can you expect a job?! Nowadays (ship)owners want people who speak English!"

One of the seamen was apparently known previously to the GS, and he was particularly poor at English, having difficulty putting together a sentence. The GS asked him: "you can't even say a sentence in English. What did I tell you to do last time? Did you take the four month English course?" The young man indicated yes with a subtle body movement. The GS asked: "Then how come you can't speak English? Did you complete the course?" He then said no. "So, who to blame?!" reprimanded the GS. The seaman indicated that himself was at blame, to which the GS replied in a satisfactory tone: "Ah! If you don't help yourself, how can I help you? Nowadays employers want high quality seamen who can speak good English!"

Another set of questions the GS routinely asked were about when the seamen had completed their training and what special skills (such as welding) they possessed. In one case, a seaman who completed his training in 2004 said he had no special skills. On hearing this, the GS quickly rejoined: "2004! Now is 2009, five years! What have you been doing? If you don't learn new skills along the way, how can I help you? You are all the same, completed training, but with no experience, no special skills ... There are just too many of you! Those with some special skills or sea experience will have an advantage over you. How can you find a job if you are not improving your skills?" The seaman was left overwhelmed and speechless, as was everybody else.

In such a way, with only several exceptions, all those who came that morning were turned away after being effectively told that they were deficient and lacking in employable qualities. In the interview after the audience session, the GS confirmed to me again his opinion of the seafarers:

[t]hat was the old mentality of the seafarers. You must have noticed that there was one seaman who came who was around 57 years of age, he is still a Seaman One! Seaman One is the lowest category, okay. ... So, you ask him, "why don't you come up after Seaman One, you could have become an Able-bodied Seaman, you can become a Bosun, you could have become a Serang,¹ why didn't you do that?" "No no," he's very happy because they don't want to take up a higher position, because that position came with responsibility, so they were happy with doing the chipping, painting ... the small work ... doing that job and going back (home) ... not the ones with responsibility.

Here, in addition to the lack of skills and competence, the seafarers were also attributed an un-aspiring mentality, which in the GS's opinion is clearly something the seafarers can blame themselves with. Such opinions on the member seafarers do not belong to the GS alone, but are widely

¹Able-bodied Seaman (AB), Bosun, and Serang are all ranks of seafarers onboard ships, though Serang is now a defunct category.

shared among the officials of UA. For example, the union Vice President (VP) also saw many job-seeking ratings as bogus, and took a social-Darwinist position regarding the difficulties these seafarers may face in relation to employment, such as the exploitatively low-wage rates that are almost the norm in the Indian ratings' market. The VP spoke with reference to myself as a researcher in an interview:

See that you are a postgraduate, you go to a good company, you get good atmosphere, good stipend, and everything, you are getting all these. Somebody (else) has only 35 (per cent marks) . . . only pass, pass out. The company, they are not appointing him, where can he go? He has no job, then he goes to the low companies. He can (only) go to low companies (because) nobody will be appointing him. Same thing in the shipping, so many seafarers are there, they are having fake documents, that is bogus.

Needless to say, holding such judgements of its members has profound implications for the union's fundamental position when it comes to representing the seafarers in front of the employers; but at the same time, meting out these judgements onto the seafarers also achieves disciplinary effects by hammering into the seafarers' minds the belief that they are incompetent, inadequate and therefore should be ready to lower their expectations. Forming such an attitude amongst the job-seeking seamen is obviously advantageous to the employers, and indeed, as the following data shows, the union joins hands with the employer in the perceptual and attitudinal discipline of seamen.

Every month, UA holds a "Trade Union Workshop" (Tuw) for seafarers who have newly joined the union. The apparent aim of this workshop is educational, i.e., to raise trade union consciousness among early-career seafarers. But this, in my observation, was in fact substituted with the inculcation of a tribal loyalty towards UA. The Tuw I observed started with speeches made by the VP and GS, in which heroic narratives were animatingly told about how UA had been championing the cause of the seafarers for over a century. The impressionability of those inexperienced and sometimes naïve young seafarers was obvious, as they became instantly enamoured with UA's discourse. Applause and cheers abounded during the speeches (some of which were orchestrated by UA staff), and it was clear that these new members' deference and respect for the union and its GS were strengthened into admiration and loyalty. The most interesting section of the whole workshop, however, was one called "Employers' Expectations," during which a manager from a prominent crewing agency was invited to speak to the desperate seafarer-wannabes. What was notable was how through ostensible "experience-sharing" the manager subtly achieved disciplining. I talked to two seafarer attendees of the workshop, Gupta and Swadeep (pseudonyms), after the session. Gupta reported what he remembered most firmly from the crewing manager:

Filipino crew all better. Filipino crews so better . . . so much better. Indian crew want 1,000 dollar, but he (Filipino) wants 500 dollar, he is very poor. Why not go for Filipinos . . . Filipino so better.

The fact was, during the "experience-sharing" session, the manager told a story in which one Indian seafarer resigned from his job prematurely in order to attend family matters, which caused the ire of the shipowner. Three days after his resignation, all Indian crew onboard that ship were sacked, and replaced by Filipino crew, who cost less, and caused fewer "troubles." The idea that the Filipino seafarers are an imminent threat to the livelihood of Indian ones was deeply impressed onto the minds of the participants of the workshop. When asked about what he was going to do, now that he had been told that the Filipinos were "so much better," Gupta said:

Actually, I am also Indian; the Filipinos are so better, because company is paying me about 1,000 dollars, 1,000 plus . . . And I [still] got some requests, [saying to the company] "you are not paying me properly salary." Even I want OT [over-time payment]. Actually company is paying hundred

[per cent], but I am [still] not happy . . . but Filipino persons are good, if you are pay 500 dollar, he also ready for work, any work, you know.

Clearly, the seafarer now painfully “realized” that some of his requests were unreasonable in the light of those Filipino seafarers who offer greater “value for money” to employers. Even a sense of remorse and self-criticism could be detected in the above seafarer’s epiphany. It is crucial here to point out that at the time of interview, Gupta had only had one sailing experience and that was onboard an Indian coastal ship. He had *not* actually worked on a foreign-going ship at all, and thus receiving \$1000 plus had never been his personal experience.

The discipline that the TUW attendees received was further confirmed in the following conversation I had with Gupta and Swadeep:

Interviewer: So should you also be happy with less money? And be working hard?

Gupta: If your salary 1,000, you are so good, anybody Filipinos still better.

Swadeep: Filipino go with 600 dollars, 700 dollars, Indians more than 1,000 dollars! So thinking about the matters, who is the best? Suppose you are a (ship) owner, I am going 600 dollar, and he is going 1,000 dollar, who you send (for)?

Interviewer: The cheaper is better.

Swadeep: Then? It’s a business!

Interviewer: As an Indian, what are you going to do then?

Swadeep: Admit I am wrong! So I accept I am wrong! . . .

Interviewer: So you are more lucky now (than Filipino)?

Swadeep: Yeah yeah, lucky! Why lucky? Because I have our union! They struggle too hard. After six days working, one day holiday also working.²

Most interestingly, as the end of this conversation shows, the disciplinary discourse by the manager and the educational (or loyalty-cultivating) discourse by the union converged in a mutually strengthening fashion. The message cannot be mistaken: it is the union that has secured Indian seafarers over \$1000 per month, “so much higher” than what Filipino seamen demand, thus the Indian seafarers must feel grateful to the union, and behave themselves properly, to the satisfaction of both the unions and the employers’ expectations. They have to be “good” seamen, Gupta commented; as if drawing a neat conclusion from what he has learned during the workshop, he said: “our union wants good crew. Should have good attitudes, and behaviour, like bow to your captain, senior sirs, officer and second officer, third officer.”

From the above examples it is clear that in Union A, the disciplining of members is achieved through influencing and moulding the self-concepts of the ratings so that they become pliant in accepting employment terms and when faced with harsh realities on their jobs. The talk given by the crewing manager at the Trade Union Workshop also leaves little doubt as to whose chief advantages are the disciplines exercised. In particular, there is a coercive character to UA’s disciplinary regime, because in effect what the union members have been told is that they are just not good enough and are not worth the money they are being paid. This somewhat denigrating regime of discipline is, nevertheless, consistent with the “personality” of the trade union.

²In the morning’s talk, the union had also been telling the audience how hard they are working on their behalf.

Union B: “We are like a family!”

Its Marxist overall identity means that UB is obliged to take, at least ostensibly, a more radical approach when it comes to representing the interests of their members. Despite this, my observation shows that, both being unions dedicated to representing ratings, a lot that has been said about UA equally applies to UB. In the fieldwork, I discovered that it had become an established and almost universal practice for maritime unions to act as quasi-hiring halls in the Indian context. Junior seafarers, like those who loiter around the UA building hoping to see the General Secretary, often find it more effective to apply for seafaring jobs through their trade unions rather than through the proper crewing agencies. Union members are either directly allocated to an employer who has collaboration with the union, or are provided with “reference letters” or “guarantee of good behaviour,” which make their prospects of finding a job easier. Obviously, the employers favour those unions that are most effective at disciplining their members, and such unions are in turn to be favoured by seafarers seeking union membership. Hence, a circle of self-reinforcing discipline is put in place, and both UB and UA participate and compete in this circle. That UB is not exempted from having to play the game of “discipline and punish” could be gleaned from my following interview conversation with a manager of a crewing agency which had been collaborating with UB for a long time:

Interviewer: Can you tell me what kind of seafarers do you expect from Union B? ... What kind of seafarers do they send you?

Manager: See, today seafarers, what is required: they should work onboard. (laugh) That is all.

Interviewer: They should work onboard ... what do you mean by that?

Manager: Put in the best efforts, not claim about over-time or various other things. Just do their work when they are supposed to do.

Interviewer: What's your experience with the seafarers affiliated with this union?

Manager: Ah, it's been good! We never had any problem with the crew or the union. ...

Interviewer: Because this union is a Marxist one. ...

Manager: Yeah ...?

Interviewer: So they might be ... so the seafarers might be different from other unions'?

Manager: No, no no no ...

Interviewer: So they are also very “disciplined”?

Manager: Yeah yeah yeah. See, discipline comes from the leadership on top. So the top leadership is good, automatically the discipline has to go down. If you don't support something wrong doing of the crew, naturally they will not.

As this excerpt reveals, the working relationship between this manager and UB seems to be a cordial one. The manager “never had any problem” with the union, despite his somewhat suspicious requirements that seafarers should “not claim about over-time or various other things”—which they might be entitled to—and to “just do their work when they are supposed to do.” The unmistakable undertone here is that companies expect nothing but very obedient, or even subservient, seafarers. Ironically, the manager even rejected the notion that UB was *Marxist* right out of hand, as if it was a universal dirty word, and confirmed that UB's good working relation with this company hinges on the fact that the union makes sure their members do not commit so-called “wrongdoing.”

With regard to UA, which is non-Marxist, disciplining of this kind is exercised much more easily and overtly as the previous section has shown; after all, the union is now the gateway to bread and butter for the relatively powerless seafarers. However, the situation is obviously more awkward for a self-styled Marxist union, whose very identity hinges on radicalism and a

ritual denunciation of “capitalist exploitations.” The question then is: how exactly is discipline effected in UB?

It seems at UB the disciplining is effected through a mixture of carrot and stick, of care and control, and of paternalism and authoritarianism. When the shipping companies have vacancies and request candidates from the union, the union sends its members from a long waiting list. In principle, this waiting list operates on a fair rotation system; yet the crucial discretionary power in the hands of the union officials means that it also serves a potent monitoring function. The Organizing Secretary (OS) of UB explains the system to me:

We know who is to get relieved, he will go and relieve that man, that man will come out of the ship, and report to us: that “I have got relieved, I have completed my turn.” So we will check up with him: he had any problem? Did he have any problem right now? How is his performance? We assess their performance. Suppose if we’ve got a complaint from ship [saying] that this man is not behaving properly, so we’ll warn him: that you have come from this union, your behaviour must be proper, so you are under watch-list. You have to be careful next time. He will go on leave, come back to us, then he will be processed accordingly: if he is a little severely to be punished, he will skip one trip, as a punishment. Somebody else may go in his place. So, he will feel bad: because of his misbehaviour he had to skip a trip, so he will be careful next time. So all these disciplinary things, we are managing.

Here, the deprivation of employment itself is used as the most effective means for punishing members who “misbehave.” The disciplinary function that is normally exercised by the employer is surreptitiously passed down wholesale onto the trade union. The employer who has a formal contract with the seafarers, which should rightfully enable them to discipline their employees, seldom feels the need to discipline; whereas the trade union, which only issues informal “reference letters” actually wields the whip.

Yet, Union B’s discipline and punish on its members are exercised in a more subtle way than it may seem. Certain Marxists values/ethics and communitarian modes of social relationships are mobilized, in a mutually reinforcing fashion, in the service of discipline, which makes the union’s grip on its members more *gentle* but also more *total*. In UB, the officials and members alike pride themselves on their grassroots culture and ethos of comradeship. As the General Secretary of UB put it: “We are working on the ground level. At Union A, they are working at apex level. We want to be always in ground-level work!” The *comradely* care and solicitude is further seamlessly transvalorized into a kind of *family* care and solicitude. One UB Organizer compared the union culture to that of a family:

We are like families. We know *each and everything* of others, their problems, their issues. We are keeping a *full history* of all the seamen. . . . These are all seamen with us. [He showed me a pile of seafarers’ profiles, with their detailed bio-data and employment records, family history, etc.—field-notes] Each time we send a seaman, we check his record; we prepare a slip, to be signed off by our Secretary, then we send. If the Secretary has some bad remarks, we’ll not allow him.

This, it seems, is not just any kind of family, but an authoritarian family, where the gaze of family members demands to see “each and everything of others,” where, more specifically, the *parental gaze* and authority are supreme. The union leader, in this case mainly the Secretary, holds absolute authority over the members by controlling their access to employment and therefore livelihood. More explicitly, regarding the much revered Secretary of the union, the OS once said: “He is like our father figure—he is not that age of course—but everybody respects him like that.” The paternalistic nature of discipline is perhaps at its most naked when the OS revealed to me that sometimes seafarers who have “seriously misbehaved” would actually get a slap on the face from the Secretary!

Union C: “We are not workers, we are intellectuals!”

The need for both UA and UB to exercise discipline on their members, of course, has much to do with the structural oversupply of labour in the rating market, which decisively tilts the bargaining power towards the side of the employer. This then invites the question as to whether in the short-supplied officer labour market there is still a case for the union disciplining its members. At first glance, data on UC strongly suggests otherwise. Indeed, the very premise on which discipline was possible in UA and UB, i.e., an intimate but asymmetrical power relationship (be it coercive or pastoral) between the union and members, is almost entirely absent in UC. As my interviews with both UC officials and members reveal, this is due to two interrelated factors.

The first has to do with the identities and social position of maritime officers which are radically different from those of the ratings. In India, officers are generally perceived to be elites because of their educational level. As all maritime officers are equivalent to university degree holders, with many of them going on to acquire even higher qualifications, the officers are regarded, by others and themselves, as a group of rationalistic, individualistic, economic-minded elites empowered by knowledge and self-confidence. In the UC General Secretary’s mind, this makes it impossible for the union to organize them, let alone to discipline their behaviours:

As far as officers are concerned, see, we are dealing with intelligent people. If you tell them we want to go on strike, or we want to stop the ship, they will put you 20 questions: why, when, how, why not. . . . As far as these people are concerned, no . . . if I tell them, “ok please come [for strike],” you will find not even five people will come to me. (GS of UC, interview data)

Talking about the total independence of the officers from the union, the GS continues: “The officers are on their own, looking for the job. Like IT people . . . like doctors, like engineers, they go on Internet, they look for the job themselves, they discuss with the shipowners themselves.” Furthermore, the calculativeness and economic-mindedness of the officers are put most bluntly as follows by the Joint Secretary (JS) of UC to explain their utter apathy in unionism: “now, officers, what they want/require is the money. As long as they are getting their money, they are not bothered. And they *are* getting enough money!”

The JS’s observation that the officers are “getting enough money” relates to the second factor which further explains the apparent absence of disciplining in the officers’ union, which is, to put simply, that officers are on the whole satisfied, and there is thus neither discontent nor the need for discipline. My interviews with not a few officers confirm that because they are highly sought-after, employment-related mistreatments are very rare, and often their companies automatically renew their contracts and provide various forms of additional perks in order to retain them. Indeed, they are so well sought-after that one officer told me: “if you take a two-month leave, they call you (back to work) in one month.”

However, hidden behind the apparent absence of disciplining in UC is arguably a yet more subtle and sophisticated form of discipline that is embedded in the identities and subjectivities of the maritime officers, which are wrought through both external ascriptions and voluntary self-identification. For example, there is another side to the eliteness of officers which, according to the GS, should be counted on to explain the lack of radicalness in his union:

They are officers: they are mostly coming from a class of family that the bringing-up is different. They are educated, coming from a respectable family . . . so it’s not in their blood, majority of them; it is not that all the officers are docile, all the officers are soft, no, not necessarily; but majority of them *are*.

Cast as a hereditary docility, which infers deference to authority and power, it is a blue-bloodedness that these officers are believed to possess by birth. This inherited eliteness then resonates with the officers' high education levels and career achievements, setting the officers almost untouchably apart from the ratings:

We are officers, a gentlemen's union. It is not plebiscite . . . all officers are well educated. They don't want to go into the labour problems, or into the radical side. And Marxist and all that . . . this is for the labour, basically, not for the officers. . . . Officers have their own dignity. If you go to the crew union, the rating . . . he may not even be 10-pass.³ Officers who are highly intellectual, they don't want to work under that fellow, who is not his equal. (Joint Secretary of UC, interview data)

It is clear from this quote, while being constructed as intellectual gentlemen who are not "plebiscite"—a byword for radicalism and the lack of "discipline"—the officers emerges with a well-defined collective identity that leaves no room for "Marxist and all that." The Joint Secretary further invokes the position occupied by officers on the chain of command in the shipping industry to illustrate that officers are effectively disciplined by virtue of *who they are*:

They [officers] are supposed to be the office-bearers, labour [ratings] is just . . . they are labour, they can call for the strike, they can do anything; officers means he is having a responsibility, he cannot do that!

On the other hand, the officers' own self-perception and self-definition, which by and large do not deviate from the above identity constructions and ascriptions, further strengthen what might be regarded as in effect *self-discipline*. For example, the individualism, independent spirit and a confidence derived from their intelligence and competence often mean that officers see it as their own responsibility to avoid employment-related mistreatments instead of relying on trade unionism to combat abuse. For example, a young officer, in his comments below, wholesomely shifts the responsibilities of the employers to treat seafarers decently and of the unions to restore that decency when infringed onto the shoulders of the seafarers themselves, and theirs alone:

See, right company is very important. Right company is very important, but if your country's union is supporting you, that's like, you know, *cherry on the cake*. But, see, what can your country union do, if you, knowingly, you are joining a blacklisted company, what your union can do? Nothing. This is *your* mistake. You are joining a blacklisted company, you know this company is blacklisted, why are you joining it? Maybe you have to struggle a bit, maybe you have to wait for 10 months more, maybe you have to wait for one year more, but don't join a blacklisted company! *Union can't help you when you join a blacklisted company*. So, even union can't do anything about it.

As these data vividly illustrate, contrary to the appearance that in the officers' union there is no disciplining, the construction and ascription of the identities of maritime officers and the officers' own subjectivity formation along those collectively shaped contours constitute in fact a system of subtle *self-discipline* that prescribes the officers' attitudinal boundaries and effectively corrals them to a limited field of perception and action.

Discussion

The three unions' contrasting disciplinary regimes and their respective inner workings may be further illuminated using the theoretical vocabulary provided by Michel Foucault.

³"10-pass," a level in Indian educational system, equivalent to completion of secondary school education.

In his seminal work *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) famously proposed that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the modality of power underwent a transformation from the *sovereign model* based on terror and excess to a *disciplinary model*, based on surveillance and normalization. This disciplinary technique of power *cares* and *enables* as much as it does coerce and constrain. In contrast with UA, where the rating members are brutally confronted with the unpalatable and denigrating message that they are incompetent, un-aspiring and thus undeserving, UB's leadership strives to create a culture where members feel actively engaged with and cared for. As the UB officials always maintained, they keep an intimate and solicitous relationship with their members. While such a caring relationship may create greater psychological and material wellbeing for the members, the paternalistic nature of the care system also invests in the union leaders' hands the power to discipline members even more effectively, as the members now come to perceive their obedience to the union officials not only as a professional/organizational duty, but as a quasi-familial and moral one. Hence, we find that the discursive disciplining in UA is articulated largely in a professional register, with emphases laid on issues such as technical competence (e.g., English, or technical skills), global competition (e.g., the purported fact that Filipino seafarers are "better"), and professional conducts (e.g., regarding premature resignation); in contrast, the disciplinary levers which UB officials pull are the family like bonding and the senses of duty and responsibility implied therein. It is no surprise then that the Secretary of UB is compared to a father who slaps misbehaving union members, because, after all, a father has every legitimacy in slapping his misbehaving son. The UB Organizing Secretary's admonition to union members "that you have come from this union, your behaviour must be proper" also shares an uncanny resemblance with the cliché communitarian mantra that one should not bring shame upon the name of one's family.

In Union C, as we have seen, although the union does not and cannot exercise direct discipline over its members, the identities and subjectivities of these self-conscious elites constitute their *own* disciplinary regime, one which is even more subtle and sophisticated and equally effective. Compared with the members of UA and UB who are *disciplined*, UC members are to be better understood as *self-disciplining*. The officers, who are ascribed certain identities and who subsequently confirm and entrench these identities through their wilful constitution and definition of themselves as rationalistic, independent-minded and self-reliant elite individuals, can be seen as practitioners of "the technologies of the self" (Foucault 1997, 2005), in which powerful disciplinary transformation of oneself is effected through the desire for a truth about oneself. In short, the maritime officers are the self-disciplining subjects bounded by their own subjectivities.

Notwithstanding these variations, the common "product" of the three "union regimes" is a highly disciplined seafarer subjectivity—one that chiefly works to the advantage of the employers. In theory, a cordial and productive industrial relation is highly desirable, provided that the relation is of a mutually beneficial nature, doing justice to both the employer and the employed. However, my various observations in the field (Yang 2010a) convince me that, in an over-supplied labour market, the maintenance of industrial justice is precarious, especially in a context where the rule of law cannot be taken for granted and general social welfare is absent. Under such conditions, trade unions are understandably entrusted with expectations that they become the provider of such justice and welfare. Quite contrary to Hensman's (2010) more upbeat evaluation of the Indian trade unions, my exploration in this paper shows that through disciplining their own members and conditioning their perceptions and attitudes in such a way that it becomes easier for employers to "have their ways" with the employees, the unions concerned in this study have by and large *not* effectively resisted the neoliberal ideology of "non-interventionism." Union A's inculcation of a social-Darwinian mentality in its members and Union B's cooperation with an employer who demands obedient seafarers are cases in point. It is also not difficult to see that the identity construction and ascription of its members by Union C and the members'

voluntary self-subjection are performed pursuant to an explicitly neoliberal grammar which valorises the empowered individual *homo economicus*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper empirically demonstrates that trade unionism is at the risk of further losing its critical character and becoming yet another form of ideological labour disciplinary regime, given the ambiguity and indeterminacy that characterize the trade union crisis and transformation. Although the insights offered in this paper arise from a specific case study and therefore caution must be exercised in more general theorizing, the prospect of trade unionism metamorphosing into an extension of the powers of global capitalism is, nevertheless, one that surely deserves urgent attention and further examination.

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