

More Operated On Than Operating

—Telephone Operators' Attempts At Self Organisation

ON the morning of August 23, we received a call at **Manushi** office from telephone operators at Kidwai Bhawan, asking us to go there and report on their lightning strike. When we reached there, we found the building full of thousands of operators, most of them women, raising slogans, and unwilling to listen to the union leaders who were trying to placate them.

The officers had shut themselves into their rooms and refused to negotiate except with the established unions in whom the women professed to have no faith. The night before had occurred the now famous incident when P.C. Sethi, Congress (I) member of parliament and former home minister, had walked into the building and violently abused an operator who had not been able to put through his call to Bombay. He is alleged to have been drunk, and to have threatened the operators with a gun, using insulting language like "You women can be bought for Rs 5 apiece."

The women were also very agitated by the way their officers had kowtowed to Sethi, promising him that the operators who had "misbehaved" would be punished. One officer, Sahi, is alleged to have told the operators to treat the incident as an occupational hazard: "Aren't there bank hold ups? After all, there has been no casualty." Another response, articulated by Vijay Kumra, a union leader, was that some people are above the law: "Mr Sethi is not an ordinary mortal. Only Rajiv Gandhi can punish him because he is the ruler of our country."

A first information report accusing Sethi of trespass, assault on a public servant and intimidation, had been lodged at the Parliament Street police station, citing 80 operators as witnesses. However, no action had been taken, and the police claimed that the medical check up showed he was not drunk.

When we reached, the women's main demand was that Sethi be arrested. On talking to the women, we found widespread discontent amongst them regarding their work conditions and, more important, regarding the way they are viewed by the public and the authorities. They seemed to feel that Sethi's humiliation of them was an extreme example of the contempt in which they are generally held.

This seemed paradoxical, considering that most citizens feel they are at the receiving end of humiliation inflicted by telephone operators. The general opinion is that to make a call through the exchange is a nightmarish experience, and this is often put down to the alleged inefficiency and callousness of the operators. In fact, many people felt a sense of vicarious gratification at Sethi's behaviour, and, after the incident, a number of irate subscribers have told the operators over the phone: "Only P.C. Sethi can set you right."

The operators' answer is: "Let Kidwai Bhawan be open to the public so that they can see how many cups of tea we drink, how much time we get to knit, sleep or gossip."

Unfortunately, while any place is open

to so called very important persons (VIPs) like Sethi, even to harass the workers, ordinary citizens like us would not be allowed in, even at the workers' behest, and for the legitimate purpose of verifying the truth of what the operators describe. We tried to enter and see for ourselves, but were not allowed in hence what follows is based on the operators' descriptions. We also tried to get an appointment with the manager but were not given one.

The operators say they are overworked to the extent that it is impossible not to be neglectful. For example, a service like 199 for assistance in making local calls is used by 20,000 subscribers through this exchange alone. Such overuse indicates the deplorable condition of the direct dialling system. One operator has to handle five lines under 199 and, frequently, all five lines are simultaneously busy.

The operators sit in a row, one next to the other in a large hall. This can be verified from photos that appeared in national dailies. Each woman is disturbed by all the other voices. Hence, it is natural that they can barely hear the voice on the line, particularly as most lines are in a state of chronic disrepair, that they have to shout to be heard, and that, while they are dealing with one subscriber, four others must wait.

Another example of systemic malady is the special reservation system for VIPs. A list is maintained of names from joint secretaries upwards to the president. A call by any one of these persons

automatically gets preference over other trunk calls booked earlier. Frequently a VIP books a call and then is not available when it materialises, or gives a number that has changed, as Sethi is alleged to have done. The operators say that usually, when VIP calls do get through, in preference to ordinary citizens' calls, the VIPs or their PAs waste time exchanging trivia. A VIP is charged at half the rate an ordinary citizen has to pay.

In addition, the operators say their exhaustion level is very high, because they have to work seven hours at a stretch with only two breaks—one for 10 and the other for 20 minutes. There is no fixed time for these breaks. An operator can have her lunch only when the supervisor gives permission. One of them bitterly remarked: "It is for this bread that we toil and we do not even get time to eat it in peace. Even to visit the toilet, the women must take the supervisor's permission.

Working under such straining conditions, operators need time off to recover. But far from getting the weekend that other government servants now get, these women get only one day off a week and this day is not fixed in advance. The off day is always the one following the weekly night duty each woman must undertake. Since no transport is provided to drop women home after night duty, many women spend the night at the exchange and go home next morning. For these women, the off day does not amount to a full holiday, as they have to commute even on this day.

The telephone department does have a fleet of vans but these are used only to pick up women from home, on Bandhs Or Holi. Clearly, management is interested only in maintaining thin service by getting workers to work in troubled times but could not care less how they commute daily. Any woman who reaches work even a few minutes late has to wait several hours and join the next shift. Often, women reach late not due to their own fault but because the lifts in the

building are out of order and they have to climb up the stairs to the ninth floor.

The women were bitter about the state of the dormitories where those who live far away have to sleep after evening or night duty. The beds are two tiered bunks, and the dormitory low ceilinged. This resulted in a woman getting badly injured by the ceiling fan. After that incident, a mesh was installed between the fan and the top bunks. This mesh now obstructs breeze from reaching the

The operators say that the low scales of pay have led to the profession being held in low esteem. When they go for night duty, their neighbours often pass nasty remarks, accusing them of being immoral women. Prospective in-laws also view them with suspicion.

A number of the operators do not even enjoy the security of service that most government jobs ensure. At Kidwai Bhawan, there are about 3,000 regularised operators and 1,600 others,

NEWSHOUND



By Rap

lower bunks. The dormitory is badly ventilated and stuffy and the coolers do not work. Women allotted lower bunks rarely get any sleep unless they share a top bunk with a friend. But the bunks are so narrow that sharing them is also very uncomfortable.

All this has affected the health of many women. They suffer from frequent headaches and fainting fits. The only medication available at the exchange is aspirin which is doled out for all sorts of ailments.

When a telephone operator joins, she is paid a basic salary of Rs 260 a month and gets a yearly increment of Rs 8. After 16 years of service, she is eligible for promotion to the Rs 425 grade but her designation and work remain unchanged. Promotion avenues are few and have recently been diminished. For example, there are 1,182 operators in the trunk calls section at this exchange, but only 116 supervisors and 20 senior supervisors. Some operators have served for 25 years without a promotion in rank.

known as Short Duty Telephone Operators. Of these, 1,300 were recruited in 1982 and 300 in 1983. They do not see any prospect of being regularised, even after three to four years of service. This is in violation of the norm whereby an operator is supposed to be regularised after a three month training.

The temporary operators went on strike in 1984 and again in January 1986 to demand regularisation. In 1986, they refused to negotiate through the union which had let them down in 1984. They met the minister for communications who promised to regularise them but the promise remains unfulfilled.

Many temporary workers are laid off and reappointed every few months to prevent them from claiming permanent status. They are thus much more vulnerable to pressures by management during an agitation. Although not affiliated to the unions, they have their own association, with office bearers elected from amongst themselves.

The regular staff are nominally

members of one or more of the three existing unions. They say that none of these unions hold elections, with the result that office bearers continue in office for years. For instance, one union, NFPTE, has, for the last 26 years, been headed by one O.P. Gupta who is not even an employee of the exchange.

Most of the women expressed not just lack of faith in but also active indignation against the unions, who, they feel, are hand in glove with the authorities. Over the years favour with the authorities, the union leaders have acquired a monopoly over all the petty power posts such as those of timekeepers, supervisors and duty cell officers. They use their powers to harass any woman who expresses dissent or refuses to pay the union membership fee.

The recent strike too was broken by the union's machinations. In our presence, the women booed a union leader and refused to listen to her pleas to return to work. They were determined not to authorise any union delegates to negotiate on their behalf with the authorities. Their demand was that the officers come and negotiate with them right there, at the workplace. They said that if officers could come running to placate Sethi, why could not they come to talk to the workers?

But the authorities continued to

recognise only the registered unions as the representatives of the operators. The union leaders agreed to go back to work when Sethi signed a letter expressing a guarded regret. The press immediately reported that the strike had been called off. In fact, only a minority of women had resumed work. Simultaneously, management called in the army and it was reported that army personnel would run the exchange and obstinate strikers' services might be terminated. The tendency to call in the army as a solution to all problems has become a joke of late. The apotheosis of absurdity was surely reached on this occasion.

These combined pressures forced the women back to work. Sethi then publicly denied having apologised, saying the apology letter had been issued without his approval. The women were not in a position to resume their agitation. Thus, Sethi appears to have gotten away with his misbehaviour.

Although none of the women's demands has been met, and they are consequently feeling rather dispirited, one outcome of their spontaneous action is the decision of many women to boycott the trade unions. They are thinking of forming some other kind of organisation, perhaps to be called a Mahila Mandal. They began by circulating a handwritten appeal, asking

women to stand up for their rights and sever links with the unions. No woman is willing to lead or suggest any form of leadership because of their disillusionment with the leadership.

The appeal has not travelled far and many operators have not heard of it, because the working conditions — different shifts, separate floors — inhibit interaction between the women. The women thought of printing the appeal in leaflet form, but were informed, erroneously, probably by trade unionists, that a nonregistered body cannot print or distribute leaflets.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty women face in struggling for their rights is the lack of time. One operator said: "Because this is an office where most of the workers are women, it is easy to suppress them. Women have no time to fight for their rights, either at home or at the office. They do housework and then come to the office, then again go home and work. This situation is exploited by the official class. To fight against injustice and exploitation, one needs time, and that is one thing a telephone operator does not have."

Though it may be a long while before they manage to evolve an alternative form of organising, the fact that they have begun to articulate such a need is a step forward.