

# Democracy in the workplace

There are many debates about how to create democracy in South Africa. But the question of how to democratise the South African workplace is often not part of these discussions. Recently, the Sociology of Work Program (SWOP), a progressive research and education project based at Wits University, ran a course on 'Democracy and the Workplace' with shop stewards from CWIU and SACCAWU. The course was designed to explore issues of workplace and industrial democracy and to examine the experiences of other countries.

The course began by looking at theories and dilemmas of democracy and at how the idea of democracy can be interpreted and practised in different ways. Participants went on to examine the idea of exploitation and how this process forms the basis of many societies. The labour process and the dynamics which are present in the workplace were also explored. There were debates about the nature of the relationship between workers and management and participants concluded that there is both co-operation and conflict in the workplace. Workers are involved not only in resistance, but also in the creation of the product.

The course went on to explore forms of industrial and workplace organisation in the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Sweden, West Germany, the Newly Industrialised Countries and Japan. Participants looked at how each model saw the importance of democratising work and how this linked to the broader political system. The discussions raised many issues and workers found themselves trying to define socialism, analyse managerial

strategies or understand the programs of workers in other countries.

The course then went on to look at South Africa and at new managerial strategies for workplace participation. Johan Nel, a management consultant who has worked with PG Wood, gave an input on participatory management and its potential in South Africa. Participants debated many issues with Nel, including whether workers should elect their supervisors and whether workers and management can share objectives at work. This was followed by an input from a PPWAWU shop steward at PG Wood, who gave his perspective on how workers have responded to these new managerial techniques. The issue of whether COSATU affiliates should accept participatory schemes, and whether workers have anything to benefit from them, was a source of heated debate.

Discussions at the course revealed that management in various companies have begun to introduce schemes such as 'relations by objective,' quality circles and 'green areas.' One large retail company even asked the union to help solve "shrinkage" problems. This involved taking on a semi-managerial role for some time. It seems that many South African companies are developing their own ideas of workplace participation. Some participants felt COSATU affiliates should have greater direction and policy in responding to these initiatives. ☆ *SWOP intends offering the course again next year. Any union which is interested in attending the course in April, July or September 1992 should contact SWOP at the Department of Sociology, Wits University (011) 716-2908.*