

Don't let management go it alone

We have recently negotiated an agreement with one of the companies in which we are organised, and I want to share with you the experience that we got through this negotiation. It is difficult to say whether what we negotiated is co-determination or worker participation.

All trade unions are experiencing similar problems – companies are going through processes known variously as restructuring, rationalisation, transformation, etc. All of these concepts end up retrenching workers. So we have had to abandon the attitude that management alone can decide these issues and we'll protest afterwards – that we will take them on the streets with baseball bats, and the one who hits hardest wins. We must now force the company to agree that we must be part of decision-making.

The structure of these companies operates in a top down manner, while we would prefer a bottom-up approach. In the case of Premier Food Industry, the company invited the union about two or three years back to sit on the Board of Directors – doing what was not clear.

The union refused because we did not have a position on the matter. And we still have no position. In the meantime, though, the company took up the question of restructuring and rationalisation. Decisions were taken at the very same level that we had refused to be part of.

When they had decided already on the restructuring the union was asked to help in implementing what had already been decided. It became clear that the decision involved retrenchment of workers. So we approached the company with a proposal for participation in decision-making.

In the five weeks of negotiations that followed one danger we discovered was around the issue of 'accountability'. The company agreed workers could take decisions, and so we defined the scope of those decisions together. But they wanted to hold workers accountable for those decisions. In other words,

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if members of a team take a decision on the production line, which later causes a problem, the company wants to hold them liable. Which means that if the disciplinary measures require dismissal, then the individuals in that team will have to be dismissed.

We argued that if the company wanted workers to be responsible in this way, then the same management status and benefits should be applied to the workers who are participating in decision-making. The company refused.

Another problem is that worker representatives in South Africa do not have clear policy guidelines on how to intervene in strategic decision-making. We have workers who traditionally do not understand these issues. Often an entire group of shopstewards will not understand what is being discussed.

So in our agreement with Premier, we established that the company pay for workers to be educated. We agreed that workers jointly with management would determine who the educators should be. If we hadn't the company would have taken control of the whole process.

So, comrades, we don't have experience like NUM, we just have a newborn baby. The agreement is only two days old. Many unions still believe that management must go it alone. That is wrong. We must be part of decision-making – whether it's called co-determination or worker participation. But above all it must be a worker driven programme. ☆