

“Flexibility is a taboo to us. We want to be multi-skilled with real skills and not just be used to run around all day filling gaps and taking away potential jobs for other workers.”

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Workers are increasingly being asked to accept flexible job definitions. VINCENT MAZIBUKO, PEGGY MANANA, LUCKY SHUPING and ZAKES MATHABE talk about the problem.

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**A** serious new threat is facing us as workers in the commercial and catering sector in South Africa that will soon be felt by workers all over the country. It is called “flexibility” and it is based on the ideas of so-called “multi-tasking.” It has been imported from outside.

During negotiations with management earlier this year, we were told that this is a Japanese concept and it is applicable in South Africa. The situation in our country is quite different from Japan. Our working and living conditions are not the same.

Flexibility is taboo to us, because we are convinced that management simply wants us to pay for its poor economic planning. Management says that flexibility will increase productivity and this will bring more profits to the company. They say that workers who are not busy all the time will be kept busy. They are telling us that by restructuring our functions, we will learn more skills and be eligible for promotions. We are not

convinced by management arguments that with the introduction of flexibility we will learn more skills. In essence, we are going to be overworked and we will leave Pick 'n Pay without skills.

Management is saying that if we accept flexibility, there will be no retrenchments. We cannot accept a system which says that we must do many different tasks in the same job description. They are saying we must work harder and yet the pay is the same.

### **Double work for less pay**

To us, flexibility means we will be doing double work for less pay and no orientation in terms of real skills development. In a day, you will be shifted from pillar to post. In the morning you will be asked to be a shelf packer, at peak hours a cashier and later a receiving clerk. In fact you are constantly mobile. They are saying that this is multi-tasking. We want to be multi-skilled with real skills and not just be used to run around the whole day filling empty gaps at Pick 'n Pay.

In terms of multi-skilling, management is just playing with words. How can they say that you are a cleaner and at the same time you can be asked to become a receiving clerk or a cashier, and therefore you are multi-skilled.

We do not view it that way. All we want is full training for a specific job.

Flexibility has not yet been officially implemented at store level. We are quite aware that it has been coming in by stealth for quite sometime. Unconsciously, we have been doing jobs for our colleagues who were absent from work for various reasons.

We did not mind that at all. The problem came when management wanted to enforce this on us, by telling us that this is flexibility. If that is the case, we have been highly exploited as we were doing extra work for no pay. We are very suspicious of management's initiatives.

### **Flexibility reduces job opportunities**

We are told that flexibility will avoid retrenchments and



cut down on costs. We are not responsible for the company's over-expenditure and the recession.

They are also threatening us by saying if we do not enter into an agreement with them on flexibility, we will have no alternative but to retrench. Their argument is that they are paying people who are not productive.

Our counter argument to this is that we are not donkeys or slaves. It is unreasonable to say that every minute of the eight hours of work we have to be constantly on the move. In their offices, they don't spend every single minute of their time in work-related matters.

If we accept flexibility we will be taking away potential jobs for other workers. This will not help to create jobs for thousands of people who are unemployed.

The company will have the advantage of replacing our colleagues with one of us without re-employing anyone.

It will be said that "you were good as a cashier, therefore you must take on the job of the retrenched worker." This is unacceptable. Fewer workers will be forced to do every job within the company.

### **We need skills that will be beneficial to us**

The SACCAWU bargaining conference which was held in April supported our arguments on flexibility. We are demanding that Industrial Training Boards be established in the retail industry. This will help us in formulating, together with the employers, a well researched programme on training.

As Pick 'n Pay workers, we demand that we be given skills that will be beneficial to us. We would like to be truly multi-skilled so that if we

leave Pick 'n Pay, we can be employable somewhere else.

### **Casualisation is also a problem.**

Casuals who comprise 40% of the total work-force at Pick 'n Pay are a potential threat to us. They provide management with a quick and dependable source of alternative labour.

Because of their temporary nature at the work place, they do not belong to a trade union and therefore cannot support whatever demands we table to management. This affects us a lot and at times leads to confrontations between permanent and casual workers. This is very bad for us all.

Casuals are being used by management on our national holidays and at peak hours. They don't have any protection or fringe benefits. Their jobs are insecure and they have very difficult working conditions

We demand that they be fully employed and enjoy all the benefits we have fought for. ☆