

Participation and consensus

shopstewards under pressure

Management strategies based on concepts such as 'world class manufacturing' and 'international best practice' have impacted increasingly on South African workplaces in the last few years. A major component of these strategies has been concepts around 'participation' and 'consensus'.

The CEPPWAWU/TURP Petroleum Industrial Restructuring Audit (PIRA) discovered that these have been a key element in restructuring programmes at petroleum companies - even companies that have a history of anti-union attitudes.

Negotiation to consensus

Traditionally, shopstewards have advanced workers' interests in the workplace through negotiations. However, research from the PIRA found that management was developing new 'non-traditional' forms of representation through consultation forums and participation structures.

The reasons for the choice of these forums was summed up by one human resource manager interviewed who said: "These forums are a conscious decision by management to change the culture of the company to participative management." Other managers interviewed also expressed the belief that it is better to get employee 'buy in' through participative management than to force co-operation through authoritarian means.

One company had gone so far as to

Gary Phillips identifies problems shopstewards are experiencing in company-initiated participative forums.

employ an organisation development (OD) manager to implement such a vision. 'It's very basic,' this OD manager said. 'Not a single group of people will be able to run a company successfully. You cannot know it all. You need to draw from the people in the company and use the diversity available.'

Management expressed a frustration or curiosity about CEPPWAWU's reluctance to trigger workplace forums which they believe can improve the relationship with employees. Many managers interviewed were keen to develop a relationship with the workers outside the traditional bargaining relationship. The managers said they sought to improve communication within the company. One company's manager said he believed that traditional bargaining always leads to a 'win-lose' situation. However, a 'win-win' situation could prevail through using participative structures and consensus decision-making.

In the absence of workplace forums, management have started their own participative forums. These management-initiated forums seem to centre on the

following themes:

- company 'buy in' or information-sharing forums;
 - consultative employee forums (substitutes to workplace forums);
 - production problem-solving forums.
- A wide range of issues are discussed in these forums. Some of these issues, such as the first two listed below, are discussed in consultative forums in line with legal requirements. The issues include:
- employment equity, affirmative action and diversity issues;
 - health, safety and environment issues;
 - community-related issues (where refineries surround communities where workers are from);
 - improvement of organisational values;
 - production and other operational problems and solving these problems;
 - general concerns of workers (to open communication channels);

Former CWIU policy on workplace forums

- CWIU will not start up or trigger workplace forums.
- Forums will weaken the union.
- There will be no informal discussions, only formal negotiations with union structures.
- All the information, decision-making, and organisational rights of workplace forums must go to the shopstewards' committee.
- If there is a multi-union company, these rights must go to a joint forum of constituted unions.
- A joint management/union committee should not be a decision-making body. All decisions must be on mandate from the shopstewards' committee.
- If we are a minority union and a majority union triggers a workplace forum, we will assess the situation before making a decision on taking part.

- communication of company vision and business strategy;
- communication of business results;
- restructuring of the company (in Central Energy Fund (CEF) owned companies);
- company policies (those mentioned were retrenchment policy, remuneration and benefits policy, housing policy);
- working hours.

Restructuring agenda

These participative forums are clearly integral to restructuring for management. They involve the communication of company goals and values. For example, Sasol management call a regular 'town meeting' where they share the company vision and strategy with employees and communicate business results. The aim, according to Sasol management, is to get staff 'buy in'.

Sapref approached such a forum in a different way. They took their employees to the Fika Patso caves in the KwaZulu-Natal Drakensberg for team-building and employee 'buy in.' After the time in the Drakensberg, the company formed 'Fika Patso teams'. These teams are formed around particular problems at the refinery and work to solve those problems.

Soekor introduced a forum where organisational values are supposed to be 'lived and promoted'. Soekor management say: 'In this forum there are no issues of contention. You cannot win or lose. You cannot come to this forum and think, "I represent my constituency". It is co-operative. I believe in employee involvement. It is their company.'

Employee representation

Within most of these forums, employees elect representatives to the forum, so representation does not occur through

shopstewards. One industrial relations manager said that this type of forum goes beyond an 'us and them' forum. The company, he says, 'sits as a team', hence representation would not occur through shopstewards. He feels that such a forum is good because it is based on 'consensus-building and not traditional negotiations that were considered to leave one party losing and the other winning'.

Managers say that they are attracted to these forums because they 'cater for all employees' and because they want to meet with 'more than the union'. Managers also say that these forums are necessary in addition to traditional union-management meetings since the 'union looks after their people'.

Managers felt that shopstewards are not the 'only conduit for information'. The management at one company said they would like to move away from a 'bargaining unit versus non-bargaining unit distinction'.

Pressure on shopstewards

Shopstewards have come under increasing pressure to participate in these forums. Sometimes their decisions not to participate result in company policy (such as affirmative action policy) being determined without them, when management seeks to develop the policy outside of negotiations.

Other times, the shopstewards are put in a negative light when management suggests



Pic: Saad

Operational problems are discussed in the forums.

that their non-involvement is blocking progress and transformation in the company.

Pressure from workers has the potential to be stronger when managers argue that these forums will improve workers' lives. For example, one human resource manager suggested that the role of these types of forums is to 'end the apartheid-skewed benefits offered by the company'.

Some shopstewards pointed out that these forums could potentially undermine the union. In fact, some shopstewards believed that this was the exact motivation for these forums. One shopstewards committee said that their company had set up an 'Imbizo forum' to direct issues away

from bargaining. The senior shopsteward indicated that 'management uses these forums to undermine the union and to show that they are consulting with workers when really they want us to endorse their proposals. When CEPPWAWU left the Imbizò forum because of this, it collapsed.'

Shopstewards saw the culture of the participative forums as conflicting with the culture of the union. As one shopsteward said: 'There is no value for shopstewards in the forum at our company. It was supposed to be an employees' forum, but management comes to the meetings and human resources interferes. They want to make decisions at this forum - but I come from a different organisation. I can't just make decisions, I must go back to get a mandate. But at this forum, you can't come with a different view like that. They just go, "Ah, the union".'

Although management instituted these forums for 'consensus' it is clear that management alone drives the agenda for

the forums. 'Management uses these forums to undermine the union and to show that they are consulting with workers when really they want us to endorse their proposals,' said one of the shopstewards.

Toothless dog

Shopstewards expressed frustration that the participative forums were merely consultation forums. One commented that, 'We don't want consultation from management. The way that consultation happens is a problem. We must accept whatever management puts on paper. Consultation is a toothless dog. Instead, we want negotiations or joint-decision-making to take place. But, management still doesn't see workers as having real things to say.'

Union problems with participation and 'consensus' forums include:

- Management sets the agenda for the forums.



Pic: Sasol

Management wants to improve communications to solve problems.

- ❑ Issues are removed from negotiation and binding agreement. No agreements are signed at the end of discussions, and progress or change can become unclear.
- ❑ The forums can clearly play an ideological role. One petroleum refinery uses 'toolbox talks' (a type of continuous-improvement forum) to 'create awareness of a team approach to problem-solving'.
- ❑ Do forums really hold value for workers if the main reason management uses them is to achieve worker 'buy in' and increased consensus on company direction, as opposed to improving workers' lives?
- ❑ Shopstewards can be undermined as the champions of workers' interests since they are no longer the conduit for information. Companies do not appreciate the shopstewards' accountability to the union and often see it as a stumbling block to the success of these forums.

Shopsteward responses

The timing of these initiatives seems to coincide closely with restructuring in companies. As such, they are an industrial relations strategy within a broader restructuring strategy that aims to ultimately reduce costs for the company. In some cases, shopstewards have attempted to use the forums to advance union goals.

For example, the senior shopsteward at one company said: 'We have no problem with the introduction of a health and safety forum, otherwise there would be an overload on the shopstewards, since one safety representative is needed from each

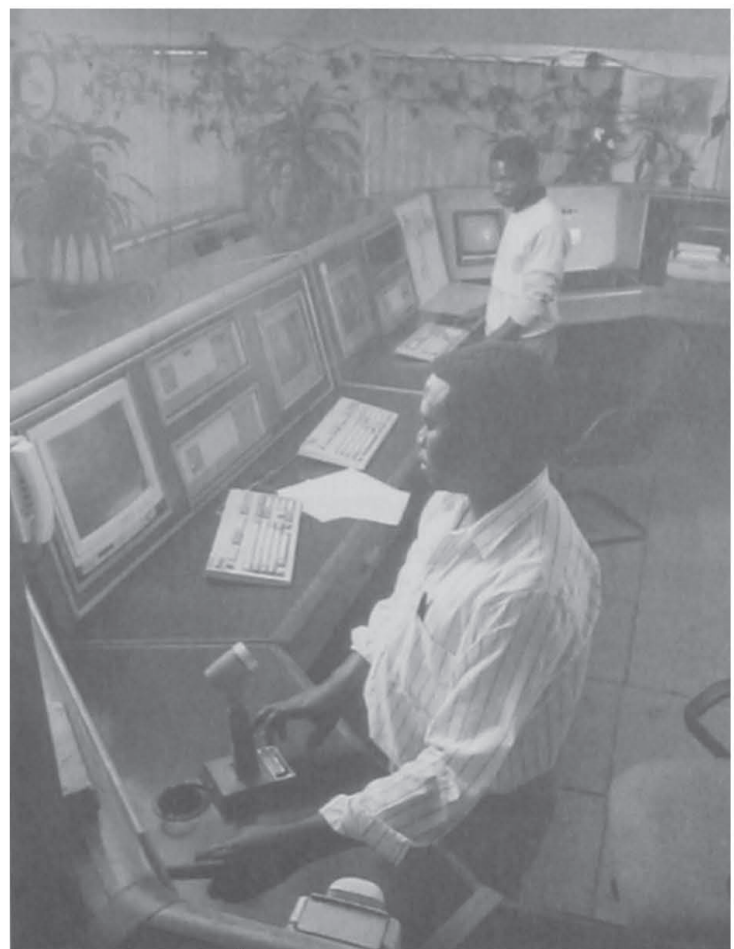


Photo: Sauced

Managers retain control.

department, but there are only three CEPPWAWU shopstewards in the company.'

Another example of where the forum has benefited workers is explained by a shopsteward: 'A worker's eyes were injured by hot oils. The shopstewards, using the forum, got management to improve protection for workers' eyes.'

Management interviewees indicated that they thought they were shifting from authoritarianism to participative management. However, the shopstewards interviewed think this shift does not represent a softening of industrial relations, but a strategy to by-pass the union during company restructuring. To deal with this, some shopstewards have demanded that participative forums be linked to company negotiation structures or that their issues are taken up in the company negotiation structures. ★