

Participation:

the Eskom experience

Any worker participation scheme, whether called co-determination or not, will be driven by two different programmes: the labour movement's and the employer's.

In the modern economy the corporate programme, informed by the desire to have a competitive edge in the international market, is driven by profit-maximisation. Consequently it pays very little consideration to any social consequences it may have. If participation is informed by partnership the union becomes part of the corporate programme.

That is why we have opted for leadership rather than partnership. The starting point in participation is to open up space for the labour movement to strengthen itself and develop the capacity of workers to challenge employers.

Different levels of participation

There are different levels of participation. The first level and the one which is most prevalent in South Africa is the participation inherent in trade unionism itself and in collective bargaining. We don't see a distinction between the trade union and the workers. In participation the trade union is the instrument of the workers, and workers have collective power over trade unions. One of the characteristics of the first level is that it is confrontational – it is a “them and us” type of approach.

In the Eskom case, we have moved a step forward. Because it wasn't fully fledged co-determination, we called it meaningful influence of decision-making by the labour movement. This second level is a form of ‘low-level’ co-determination in the sense that it merely begins to corrode the management prerogative in running the utility.

Workers are starting to demand involvement in the early stages of decision-making. What mostly happens in South

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African participation is that employers will plan behind closed doors and only call in trade unions at the implementation stage. For example, management will discuss problems in the company and take a decision to retrench. They will only call the trade union to manage the retrenchment. Therefore our discussion is about a cut-and-dried decision. As unions we want to be involved before the decision is taken.

Eskom three years ago mothballed power stations. We couldn't stop it because by the time it was brought to us, that decision had already been taken and all we were discussing with management was what to do with workers from the various stations. Now there is major shift. Already in 1994, because we are sitting in the Electricity Council (EC), we know that the four units that were closed will be opened in 1996. We know because that decision cannot be made without going via the EC. We are able to say to them, if you want to rehabilitate Cahora Bassa, what about the mothballed power station? We've raised these questions. I know this in 1994. We are able to demand their plans as Council members, they are forced to bring them. If you go to a negotiating forum and you want this information, you won't get it. And once we get this information, in our NEC of NUM, we strategise around them. Your strategy becomes more informed.

Participation through struggle

An important point about the Eskom exercise was that it was not determined by management, but rather through struggle. We challenged a restructuring programme in Eskom which cut the labour force by 30% through the "Save Eskom campaign". The campaign contained three demands: stop unilateral restructuring, stop retrenchments and we demand worker involvement in all decision-making structures.

The campaign lasted for two years and culminated in a national strike. In the middle of that strike Eskom met a number of demands that we put to them. We argued that the question of the long-term viability of Eskom as a utility couldn't be seen as a prerogative of management. We said that one can only talk of retrenchment after all other options, like transfer within the utility, retraining and redeployment, have been explored. That was accepted.

For workers to be able to influence the decision-making process they must be part of the structures of decision-making. You cannot influence decision-making over the negotiation-table, you need to be part of the structure. The company must have an obligation to share its strategic vision with trade unions.

Joining the Electricity Council

We have developed a mechanism that imposes an obligation on the employer to ensure there is optimal disclosure of



information.

In that strike to save Eskom we reached an agreement that labour would be represented in the Electricity Council, the highest decision-making body in Eskom. This has given us access to information that wouldn't have been available in a negotiating forum. And it has allowed us to intervene in decisions that previously we would only have been informed about after they had been taken.

The three labour representatives sitting in the Electricity Council have made it clear though that they are not EC members. It is important to be identified as labour representatives, to be able to say, "I cannot be part of this decision because it affects labour negatively". For example, in one EC meeting they proposed a cost-recovery approach to rentals for company housing. We said the formula for rentals for hostels cannot be the same, because they are sub-human. We cannot be party to such a decision. The right to go out there and mobilise against that decision must be maintained. It goes with the right of labour to recall you if you don't represent their interests in that structure.

Full time shopstewards

But levelling the playing fields requires more than just information. At Eskom we have had to participate in the context of a relatively well-informed and proactive

management. To improve our position we have managed to force Eskom to accept the concept of full-time shopstewards. They differ from plant-based shopstewards in that they would be responsible for an area, like a union organiser. Eskom provides the car and petrol for the shopsteward to do union work. We have 11 full-time shopstewards, covering almost every region.

Those shopstewards were not just left there – we demanded that they be trained. They went through a Wits Business School four-month programme which gave them basic management skills. That is part of capacity development. We don't want to break the union orientation and transform them into pure managers. We want them to acquire the management skills and use them for our own benefit.

We must maintain membership-driven mass action. You participate in decision-making but in the process you always try to sharpen the contradiction so that workers can take control of the process.

The participation of labour should be informed by the gains you make. If you are not able to make gains as labour there is no reason to participate in a structure. That is the starting point.

Co-determination and socialism

The third level of participation, co-determination, holds a number of dangers:

- ☐ When integrating labour representatives and capital representatives into a single structure there is a possibility that the distinction between which constituency each represents will become less clear.
- ☐ The practice of labour being encouraged to have shares in their employer's company – workers becoming owners to a limited degree – can be used to 'water down' the militancy of labour.
- ☐ Labour is being asked to put 'national interests' before their 'narrow constituency interests'. When you water down the inherent contradiction between capital and labour through a social pact, labour is going to come off as the weaker partner in that relationship.

Any participation by labour must have the objective of ultimately empowering us to move forward and attain a socialist era in South Africa – the fourth and highest level of worker participation. And if it doesn't do that, it isn't going to be in the interest of labour in this country.

The four levels of participation must give the labour movement progressively more power. In the Eskom experiment we are still on the second level. We are left with two more. What we achieve with these will be informed by the power we gain as we move upwards. ☆