

## Conflict and Co-operation: case studies in worker participation by Judy Maller (Ravan, 1992)

Sakhela Buhlungu\* takes a critical look at a new study of participatory management at the workplace.

Only a few years ago it would have been unthinkable for progressive unionists and analysts to even hint at the possibility of co-operation between organised workers and bosses. To suggest such co-operation would have earned one a label like “petty bourgeois reformist” or “social democratic reformist”. But such have been the changes in our thinking and practice in South Africa, and indeed the world over, that it is now possible and acceptable to raise the issue as one of the few options we have to carry out the process of transformation. The bosses have not been left behind in these debates. Since the late 1980s they have been discussing and, in a few instances, experimenting with co-operative approaches to industrial relations as opposed to the coercive system that has been the hallmark in this country.

Responses to so-called “participatory management techniques”, or simply “worker participation”, have been varied. On the one hand the approach has been viewed as an attempt to co-opt organised workers in order to perpetuate capitalist relations of production. On the other, there are those who argue that worker participation is a challenge that unions should accept as it presents an opportunity for workers to win real gains. Judy Maller’s book proposes a “third route” which, she argues, “must go beyond simple rejection of, or unqualified support for, all forms of worker participation. ...

Participation may open up spaces for organised struggles to change the way in which work is done, to prefigure alternative structures of workplace decision making, as well as improving the material conditions of workers”. According to Maller, this combination of conflict and co-operation depends on the existence of an independent “locus of power”, an independent union which engages the bosses without taking joint responsibility for running the workplace.

Her analysis is based on three case studies - Cashbuild, Jabula Foods and Volkswagen SA. The differences in the case studies are interesting and provide insights into factors that influence participation in different contexts. The main factors are unionisation, the strength of the union, levels of skill required in the labour process, and the willingness of management to allow some degree of participation. The major conclusion that Maller reaches is that it is possible to have a co-existence of co-operation and conflict at the same workplace.

This is exemplified by VW where NUMSA members and shopstewards have been able to engage the bosses and “push back the frontiers of control”. By contrast, industrial relations at Jabula are characterised by a dictatorial management approach, ongoing conflict, and weakness of union structures. Cashbuild, on the other hand, was not unionised. Representatives were not accountable to the workers, while the

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attitude of the workforce was one of passive acceptance of participation.

On the whole, the book is very interesting and is likely to provoke a lot of debate on the future of industrial relations. It adds to our understanding of shifts in management strategies in the context of a rapidly changing world. In a sense, it is also a challenge to trade unions to begin to address the issue in a more strategic way.

However, a few points need to be raised about Maller's analysis. It is incorrect for her to suggest that co-operation only begins when workers and management adopt worker participation. Co-operation, like conflict, is always a feature of union-management relations in any situation. One of the two will predominate, at any one moment, due to factors within and beyond the workplace. In South Africa, conflict has been predominant because of the workers' perception that employers have, in many ways, been responsible for, and have made profits from exploitation and oppression.

The book does not look at the reasons why the workers decided to get involved in participatory practices. It also does not look at whether the workers got any advice and research support from their unions and service groups. One does not get a feel of the initial debates and responses by the workers when management first came up with worker participation. It is therefore not clear whether the decision by workers to participate was part of an overall union strategy to transform workplaces.

Analysis of the VW case study, while it is very interesting, does not take account of the fact that the company is a multi-national which (unlike Cashbuild and Jabula) draws on the wealth of experiences from the parent company in Germany. This should have been highlighted for the benefit of the reader. Perhaps a comparison with Toyota would have been more relevant.

The question of support for the workers by means of training is unfortunately not dealt with in the book. Participation can only begin to be meaningful and effective if the workers, especially shopstewards, have been trained in areas like planning, finances and others. Without this it is dangerous to suggest participation as a

solution because worker leaders can be overwhelmed by technical details that they cannot carry back to the workers.

To some extent this is what seems to be happening at VW where about 99% of the workers, including some shopstewards, do not have any knowledge of the joint committees or what they discuss. 98% of the workers said they had never received report backs from the joint committees.

There is no mention of the involvement of the broader unions, in this case NUMSA and FAWU, in giving their members any back-up and guidance. Isolated initiatives and experiments are more likely to fail or collapse unless the entire union puts its resources behind them.

This brings us to an important strategic and organisational question: can we sufficiently understand participation at workplace level in isolation of the overall strategic policies of the union? A brief commentary on the debates within NUMSA and FAWU would have enhanced Maller's analysis and enabled us to get an overall perspective on how unions are responding to these management strategies.

Without that it seems rather too soon to be suggesting, as Maller does, that there is a new kind of unionism emerging. A brief survey of discussions in NUMSA, beyond VW, would have enriched the analysis. This might also explain why members from the same union, namely NUMSA members at VW and at Toyota in Durban, are responding differently to new management strategies.

Another aspect not dealt with in sufficient detail is the implication of worker participation for the struggle for socialism. The most that the book says is that worker participation would change the way in which work is done and that "it may also offer a vision on how work could be organised in a transformed society". It is not clear whether Maller is being deliberately vague about the nature of such transformation and the parameters of what she calls industrial democracy.

Until recently we took it for granted that transformation meant the destruction of the capitalist system and the establishment of a socialist system. We saw democracy as being possible only under this system. We all assumed

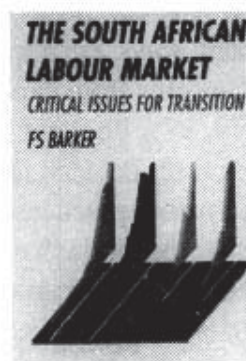
that capitalism was full of internal contradictions which would eventually lead to its overthrow through revolutionary struggle or class conflict, not class co-operation. At the workplace this would lead to the takeover and running of factories by workers through democratically elected committees. It is not clear whether this is what Maller means by transformation and there seems to be a leap of logic in her argument for worker participation. She argues for a different approach without saying why the long-held approach of class conflict is not workable.

In her conclusion, Maller argues that there has been a co-existence of conflict and co-operation between COSATU and employers at national level, as seen during the LRA struggle. This, together with participation in the National Manpower Commission and COSATU's involvement in the National Economic Negotiating Forum initiative, is seen

as the beginning of a social contract "in which labour agrees to participate in decisions governing the society and economy as a whole, implying a broad acceptance of the capitalist economy".

She says that the "macro and micro levels of union policy" are at odds on the issue of participation. This suggests the workplace relations need to be brought in line with national union-employer relations through worker participation, which would be some kind of social contract at plant level. This, by implication, would allow workers to participate in decisions about the factory as a whole. It is debatable whether at national level there is, in fact, now a "broad acceptance of a capitalist economy". Is Maller arguing for worker participation in order to make capitalism more acceptable or as part of a genuine transformation of the workplace? ☆

## The South African labour market: critical issues for transition by Frans Barker (van Schaik, 1992)



Faith McDonald looks at a new book on labour markets by Frans Barker, head of the National Manpower Commission.

**F**rans Barker's new book is a concise and welcome addition to the limited body of knowledge currently available to the layperson or student. Labour markets are an important factor of transitional and future societal stability.

The author points out that, until recently, most writings have concentrated on one aspect of the labour market, namely the protection of basic worker rights. But the interaction between broader economic issues and the workings of the labour market is now being recognised as of critical importance to a future South Africa. Hence, Barker's attempt to pull together all the key aspects pertaining to the workings of, and influences on, labour markets in general and the

South African labour market in particular.

The book contains a wealth of useful material covering all aspects of labour market theory. The opening chapter gives a general overview of labour market concepts together with the specifics of the South African labour market. The concluding chapter discusses labour market inequalities and discrimination. The body of the book covers all aspects of the labour market: principles of supply and demand; the supply of labour in South Africa; the demand for labour and productivity; unemployment; human capital; and, unions, collective bargaining and wages. This work is, for the most part, easy to read as well as being extremely informative.

An effective flow chart at the beginning is of

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