



DEBATES

Toyota South Africa: the workers' voice

"You see these guys (the workers) here, if they hear that one of their managers is dead they would celebrate, I am telling you. Because that is minus one problem."

- shop stewards council, Toyota South Africa, April 1991

Last year Nicoli Natrass wrote that Toyota South Africa has been unsuccessful in introducing Japanese management techniques. The NUMSA SHOP STEWARDS COUNCIL responds to her article arguing that these techniques only serve the employers' interests, and that the situation at Toyota between management and workers is "one of war".

We the workers at Toyota South Africa would like to tell you the truth about our company. We have read the article in the *Labour Bulletin* by Nicoli Natrass about Toyota Japan and Toyota South Africa*, and we have decided in our Toyota shop stewards council to write to you about some of the problems which that article raised.

We have decided to ask our union, NUMSA to assist us in writing this article and we have decided to tell you at the *Labour Bulletin* the truth about what is happening in our company.

Many of you will know that our company Toyota is the leader in the car market today. You may have heard that our company has been the leader of the car market for more than ten years.

But you would not have heard the voice of the workers who built Toyota into the leader of the car market today. This is because the bosses' newspapers never print what we say.

We sat in our shop stewards council and discussed many of the points that were raised in Nicoli Natrass' article. We discussed these points based on our experience and there was full freedom to contribute our ideas. What follows is a summary of the conclusions that we came to.

'Quality circles' to give management more control

In the early 1980s, maybe 1982 or 1983, the bosses came back from a trip to Japan with new ideas of how we should organise our work. Later,

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they gave these new ideas some Zulu names like *Siyacabanga* and *Eyakho*. But from the beginning they never discussed these ideas with us. They simply said that this was a new way of working which is very successful in Japan.

Then they started to organise groups of workers in work teams. These work teams were never established to listen to the voice of workers. They were simply there to give the management more control over the workers. They were used to give more and more instructions to the workers.

We as the shop stewards committee saw these teams as undermining our union because they were not only dealing with production issues, but also with the grievances that workers had at that time. Workers also saw that these teams were undermining their union and so only very few workers participated in these schemes.

Until today these work teams are still functioning in some areas of the plant. But the truth is that the workers at large are not participating in these schemes. As one of our comrades put it: "Quality circles are not functioning except in terms of some people that are pulled out by management, who are close to management, such as supervisors, group leaders and people who are looking forward to promotion. So these people are the ones that are still in these schemes."

Another worker said this about the quality circles: "To the workers at large this quality circle is something that is out - it's out, out - we are not interested."

You see comrades, the bosses just bought these ideas from Japan and forced them on the workers. There was no consultation or discussion with the union before they were introduced. And they were only used to discipline and control the workers. Even in the team you could see there was the team of management who had all management's ideas and the team of workers with completely different ideas. That is why the workers decided to ignore these quality circles.

'Cost saving competitions' to steal workers' ideas

In fact comrades, if you look at it you can see why the workers did not want to participate in

these quality teams. The reason is that the workers never benefited from all the ideas they have given management about production.

It happens daily that workers come up with suggestions but these are usually just ignored by management. Even if management takes some of these suggestions they never reward the workers for their ideas. So the workers simply lose interest, saying we are only making the company richer but we are in fact getting poorer. That is basically the impression of the workers, that even if they improve something they are gaining nothing out of it. They are only helping the bosses get richer.

One comrade gave an example in our meeting: "The workers come up with ideas and they are being presented by the workers. But once the whole thing has been put forward by the workers it is being taken by the processing management and they improve on the idea. Then you will find one day it comes out of a 'cost saving competition' that the company runs, and the bosses will be giving each other some big incentive, or payment, or present at the competition. But they are giving each other presents for the same idea that initially came from the workers. In fact they are stealing the ideas of the workers. Then they come along and they put them in the cost saving competition as though they are their own ideas."

That is the truth comrades. That is why the workers are not interested in these cost saving competitions because they have never been rewarded for their ideas. All that has happened is the bosses have stolen the workers' ideas and used then to get richer themselves. But our members just remain poorer. So the workers are saying: "How can we improve the company when there is nothing we are going to gain?"

This just shows that the bosses are not serious about even their own ideas on work teams or quality circles. They say these teams are for the good of all. But the truth is that these teams only assist the bosses and not the workers.

'Multiskilling' ignores our multi skills

This is what one worker had to say on "multi skilling":

"Workers are very much multi skilled. But

it is not recognised and compensated by the bosses. So workers start raising questions as to why they must do many different jobs."

The skills that the workers have are many. Almost daily the workers are having to do jobs of other workers who are absent from work. In this way workers get more and more skills of how to do different types of work. Sometimes the bosses call this "rotational training", but really the bosses are just using the workers to fill in for vacancies without compensating them. You see comrades it is not only our ideas that the bosses steal, but also our skills.

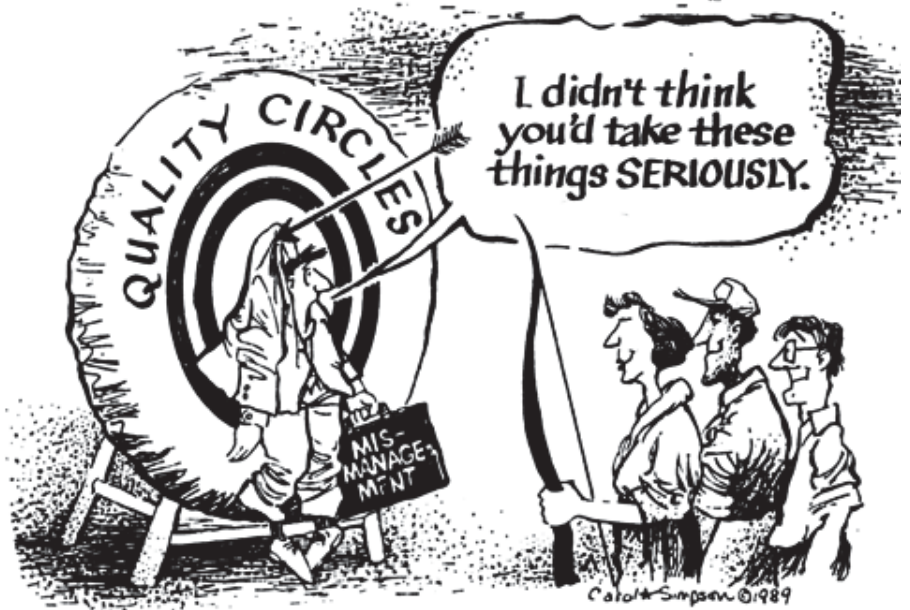
The only real training that we as operators get is a 6M course, but this is just about management interests. It has nothing in it for workers. All of the training in the company is given to administration and management.

We can give examples of students who just come into the company once they have completed their courses. They come in and just join the company and take up senior positions in the company. But they do not even know the job that we are doing. These are all management people and they are mostly white. Maybe 1% of management is from the black people.

So the vast mass of the workers at Toyota are getting skills by themselves. These skills are never recognised and the workers of Toyota are never trained to improve the skills that they have got. All the training is only done for management and the bosses higher up in the company.

Workers - especially union members - are refused promotion

One worker described our situation with regard to promotion like this: "Most of the comrades on the shopfloor are members of NUMSA. But once the bosses know that you are a NUMSA member, then that is the first obstacle you will have in getting promoted. That is the whole of the question. Now you must just remain where you are and that is basically where the line is



drawn. No matter how good or educated you are that will mean nothing."

It is clear, comrades, that for the vast majority of the workers in Toyota there is no hope of promotion in the company. Maybe there are a few black staff members who have been promoted in the past, perhaps 1%, no more. That is the position.

And even amongst those who have been promoted you will find they are people who have no following amongst the workers. If you are a strong worker leader even if you are skilled you will not get promoted.

Those few workers who are promoted are the ones who are closest to management, but if you talk of the workers generally, there is no promotion. Even when the company advertises positions that are vacant you will not be picked for promotion. The truth is that no really active NUMSA member can hope to be promoted in Toyota.

Too many managers with too few skills

The situation with management is very bad. One comrade in our shop stewards council said this about management: "They don't understand the job. They just carry out instructions."

The management structure in Toyota goes like this: at the bottom we have the group leader, then the supervisor, then the foreman, then the general foreman, then the superintendent, then the general superintendent,

then the manager, then the general manager, and then the board of directors.

You can see that there are ten different lines of management in our company. The result is that management is all giving us different instructions, and all of these managers don't know the workers' real feelings.

What's more, the attitude of management is not right. For example, you could never find a situation where a manager enters his department and greets all the workers on the line. That is how you could try to develop a relationship, but there is not that situation. Our managers don't even greet us. They are just like enemies here.

One of the comrades said this: "Each manager will pass down instructions from the top management to the superintendent, to the general foreman, to the foreman, to the supervisor, to the group leader, to the workers. Many of them don't know the job; they just carry instructions."

This has led to a situation where even production-related issues are not communicated to the workers by management. This is because the workers will not accept these issues if they come from management. Now more than ever before it is shop stewards who are having to report production issues to the workers because that is the only way the workers will come to accept them.

'Group leaders' duck out of the front line

The people who have got a real problem are the 'group leaders', because they are the last line of management before the workers on the floor. One of our workers said this about the group leaders: "The group leaders, especially, just decide to sideline themselves because they can see the situation that management and the workers have is a sort of confrontation. Now they are caught in that situation. They are also workers, but as the first line management they are expected to attack the workers. They just decide to duck out of the situation. They are not doing their jobs. They are running away from their problems because there is a confrontation situation. Now they cannot afford to be on the side of management in that situation."

Conclusion

From everything that we have said, you can see that the situation between us as the workers of Toyota and our management is one of war. We as the shop stewards of Toyota are spending every day trying to solve problems that are created by management. We are the workers who have built this company to be the leader in the car market. But the strange thing is we never feel any benefit from that.

If we can give you an example. Often the company comes to tell us they are in a crisis and when we tell the workers this, then the workers just say how happy they are because now the bosses know what it means to be in a crisis. Because, from the workers' point of view, they have been living with this crisis for many years.

Or even if there is a breakdown of the machinery, the workers often just celebrate. They do not see this as a problem, because now they can rest.

So you can see that the workers of Toyota know that every single thing they have, they have won through their own strength and power. Nothing has been given as a present from management.

It does not help to tell the workers about the 'productivity problems' of the bosses or the 'competition' of the bosses in 'the market place' because, for the workers, they have never benefited from any of these issues.

We hope that you at the *Labour Bulletin* can understand the workers' views on the crisis facing us here at Toyota. And we hope that in future when you want to learn about our company, you will come to us and we will tell you the truth. ☆

STOP PRESS: As we go to press, workers at Toyota SA are on strike, having put a number of demands to management. The above report was worked on at the NUMSA shop stewards council at Toyota some weeks ago.