

KARL VON HOLDT reflects on the LABOUR BULLETIN visit to Natal, on the achievements won by workers since 1973, and on the battles still to be fought.

The challenge *of participation*



Formal rights have been established at most workplaces in SA industry. The relation between workers and managers is no longer arbitrary, but is governed by rules and procedures. In other words, there is a 'rule of law' on the shopfloor and a collective bargaining relationship between trade unions and employers.

[Of course, many workplaces are very weakly organised, and workers are unable to take advantage of their rights.]

For example, two key participants in the 1973 strikes, Coronation and Durban Municipality, are still weakly organised. (The factories we visited are among the best organised.)

While in many workplaces there is a relatively stable relationship between union and management, in others the substance of trade union rights is constantly under management attack. There is a sharp conflict over discipline, racism, management prerogative and authority. The "rule of law" is not a given, but has to be fought for every day. Even in those workplaces where there is a relatively stable relationship, discipline is an area of conflict. The role of line management seems to be highly contested.

These conflicts may be traced to a much greater conflict over democracy and authority in the workplace. [Workers have responded to their experience of exclusion and oppression under apartheid with a vision of substantial participation and democracy as an alternative.] They see the workplace regime as still very much shaped by apartheid. Management is authoritarian, real decision-making lies in the hands of white managers, and workers only have access to information management believes they should have. Even when consultation or 'worker participation' is introduced, it is usually done in a paternalistic and limited way. The result is that workers do not *consent* to the workplace regime.

Many employers are introducing 'worker participation' schemes such as quality circles, green areas and team briefing in an attempt to enlist worker co-operation and win consent. A recent survey found that 19% of employers surveyed in the metal industry have 'participative management schemes' (see p15). In our visit to Natal only one of the four companies we targeted, Dunlop, had no such schemes. In companies such as Alusaf or

Frame these schemes are of varying, but marginal significance, whereas for a handful of companies such as Unilever they are a central element in management's IR strategy. In all of the companies we visited, [shopstewards were suspicious or sceptical of these schemes, seeing them as dominated by management and designed to undermine the union.]

[Most managements seem to regard these schemes as a

way of establishing direct communication with workers and bypassing the union.] Most managers probably believe quite simply that it is proper to exclude unions from production issues. Others have a more far-reaching agenda: in a recent interview in *FINANCE WEEK* on employee participation, Carlton Paper MD Keith Partridge said, "someday a company union, or no union at all, may happen."

Most of these schemes have limited prospect for winning workers' consent or co-operation because of the way they are implemented, but the more sophisticated ones may well win the support of workers and undermine the relation between the union and its members. Even where the 'participatory' schemes are less successful they may divide or confuse workers, and weaken the union.

Generally speaking, shopstewards do not have a clear strategy for engaging with or countering 'worker participation' schemes although this is emerging at Unilever. It is easy to reject such schemes when they are paralysed



by racism or paternalism, as at Alusaf. It is more difficult when there is a degree of real consultation. The confusion is evident when shopstewards complain on the one hand that only company problems are discussed, not worker grievances, and on the other hand, when workers' grievances are discussed, that it is divisive.

The one really powerful alternative is that proposed by the shopstewards at Frame – a proposal that they are probably only in a position to make because they have organised the monthly paid workers, including the foremen. Rather than 'participation' being diverted into special places (green areas) or forums (quality circles), they argue for a fundamental re-organisation of relations between line management and workers on the shopfloor. This means participation could be part of the way work is actually done.

The worker participation forums adopted by Unilever seem to have a similar potential. To the extent that it does lead to changing relations on the shopfloor it has similarities to the proposals of the Frame shopstewards, or to the idea of 'work teams' currently being discussed in NUMSA. But both of these focus on negotiated and structured re-organisation of work, in contrast to Unilever's informal process. However, it is not clear how much 'empowerment' is on offer here. How far can management go in giving workers power to determine how things are done in the workplace, in the absence of workers as an organised collective driving the process forward? What is exciting about Unilever is that workers are testing the participation forum in a strategic manner. This opens the possibility, precisely, that workers as an organised collective may be able to use the forums as a way of drawing forward their struggle for real control of the shopfloor.

In general, the response of shopstewards to 'participation' is to argue that they want to participate at a much higher level, where the real decisions are made. There was a strong view among shopstewards at all the companies that we visited that the workplace should be democratised, that workers should have equal

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Twenty years later –

**"We have won the
dignity of the
worker as a worker.
We can challenge
unfavourable
decisions,"
– Unilever
shopstewards.**

After criticising management for not treating workers as equals, Frame shopsteward Columbus Mbutho added, "Let us be fair – it is better than before. Things are changing bit by bit. Now we sit down and discuss with management – there is a *big* difference from before." He lists some of the gains won through union struggle and negotiation: wage negotiations, three months maternity leave, a clear grading system and the end of favouritism.

Workers at COSATU's Durban local endorsed these views: "We have won recognition and now most things are negotiated. We have won protection from unfair labour practices. We have won retrenchment packages – before we were dismissed with nothing. We are able to confront the government on any issue – even Derek Keys has to listen to COSATU."

Combating racism was a key issue for many workers. The Unilever shopstewards say, "Whites were very superior. In those days any white man could give you instructions. This meant you had to be in three different places at

there is a big difference from before."

the same time and you could be dismissed for failing. Now they have to follow the correct channels."

The Alusaf workers have also made gains in the struggle for equal treatment with white workers. They have won group life cover, a disability scheme, and a provident fund, all of which were previously available only for white workers. Bheki Ntuli laughs when he recalls that management supported the argument for excluding black workers from group life cover by arguing that "we blacks use to apply for death by going with sticks when there is a wedding feast. They said this custom means that you can

easily die there, so you have gone to your death, death has not just come by chance." The shopsteward response was that "so called white persons are also risking their lives by going to the sea, sky diving and so on. So do not tell us that we are risking."

In the grind of day to day struggle it is easy to forget how great these achievements are and how they were won through courage, hard work, blood and solidarity. If many managers are now talking about partnership with unions and participation of workers, it is because the unions fought hard and bitter struggles to establish themselves. ♦



Workers at the COSATU Local in Durban: "We have won recognition and now most things are negotiated"

Photo: William Matlala

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decision-making powers with management or directors, and that management should be transparent. But what would this mean in practice? What is the relationship between this level of decision-making and worker participation on the shopfloor? There are a number of different possibilities: co-determination councils, worker delegates on the board of directors, employee-share ownership schemes (ESOPS), work teams, etc. Each of these possibilities has potential benefits and potential

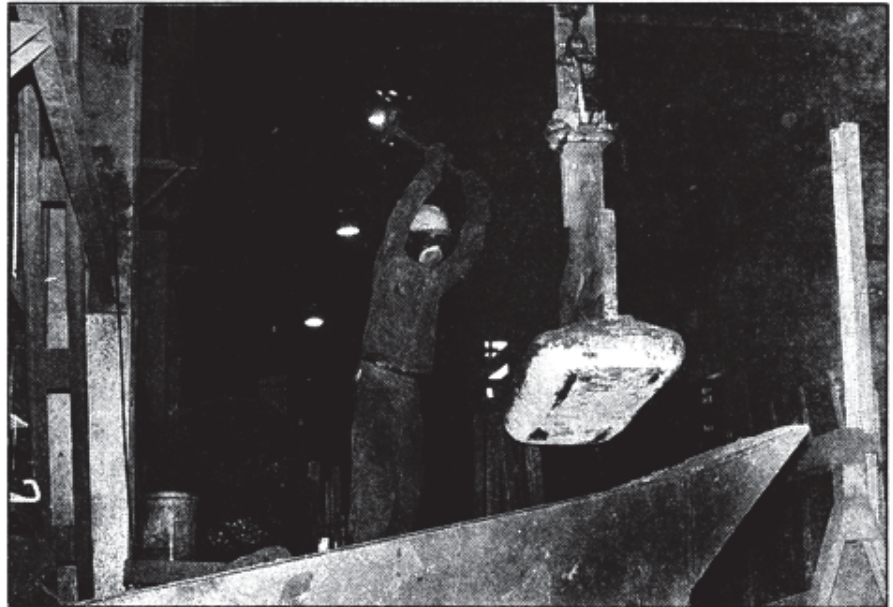
pitfalls, but neither shopstewards nor unions have debated this and developed a clear set of demands.

The management culture, structure and practice which developed under apartheid has produced a very serious productivity, skill and efficiency crisis in SA. There is a high level of alienation and resistance on the shopfloor. Successful development in SA – whether this focuses on international competitiveness or on expanding the internal market – will depend on overcoming these problems. This will require the radical restructuring of management and of management-worker relations. As a central part of such reforms, racism, discrimination and affirmative action will have to be addressed.

What could be done?

The trade union movement needs to develop clear policies on 'co-determination' issues, on 'participative management' schemes, and on affirmative action, and formulate strategies for achieving them.

- ☐ The trade union movement should engage in an urgent debate about the various options for increasing workers' participation in company decision-making. Most of these options would require a legislative framework and support, particularly as most employers would not accept them



Workers aspire to real democracy in the workplace: can they crack management resistance?

Photo: William Matlala

voluntarily. For example, the powers and rights of co-determination councils would have to be established, ESOPS could be supported by tax provisions, company law might have to be changed and so on. The labour movement needs to formulate a comprehensive programme for radical workplace reform and then campaign for this on the shopfloor, in the NEF and the NMC, as well as lobby the ANC for support.

- ☐ As part of this programme the trade unions need to develop a strategic response to management's 'worker participation' schemes. If they are ignored they will tend to weaken the unions. Unions need to find ways to use them to increase workers' power and influence in the workplace.
- ☐ The unions could formulate a national framework of demands for affirmative action in the workplace, and then campaign for these to be implemented. Demands could include a code of conduct, joint management-worker forums to tackle racism and affirmative action, and legislation to facilitate and provide resources for such a programme.

Unless the labour movement takes up these challenges, the aspirations of shopstewards and workers will wither away, and management schemes will prevail. ☆