

**M**any factories seem to be very simple places. Take the Lever Brothers soap plant in Durban. This is three stories high. At the top is a computerised control room which regulates the mixing of chemicals in a system of vats and pipes on the top two levels. The chemicals move downwards through this system, finally producing long strips of soap, which slide down a chute to the ground floor. Here the strips are sliced, shaped into bars, wrapped and packed by a series of machines watched over by operators. Simple.

implementing forms of worker participation, in part as a strategy to increase productivity as competitive pressure mounts in the market. This process seems to be most developed at Lever Brothers.

### Participation forums

According to Loyal Ndwandwe, the industrial relations (IR) manager at the Maydon Wharf site, the process of introducing more participative relations started in 1989 with a value-sharing workshop. "We faced the apartheid differences

between us in the company, and asked what sort of company we would like to work for. Out of this came the conceptual framework for later developments."

Shopstewards, says Ndwandwe, were involved and consulted from the beginning. As an example of what the participative process has achieved, he cites the election of workers to the job evaluation committee. "This is a breakthrough," he says. "At first the union was reluctant to be involved in job evaluation, but we have reached the point where shopstewards facilitated the elections of worker reps to the committee."



Loyal Ndwandwe: worker participation brings breakthroughs

Photo: William Matlala

## Unilever: *testing worker participation*

But it is far more complex than it looks. Management has introduced a series of 'participative management' innovations and is exploring this process, testing what it may mean for relations with the union and the workers. On the other side, too, workers are assessing the new participative forums, testing them to see what they may offer.

Unilever is a UK-based multinational manufacturing foods, detergents and personal care products. There are three Unilever operating companies at Unilever's Maydon Wharf site in Durban – Elida Ponds, Lever Brothers and VDB Foods. There are some 1 000 workers on the site, the majority at Lever Brothers. Their union is the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU). Unilever workers did not participate in the 1973 strikes. CWIU won recognition in the late 70s, and a wage strike in 1984 "united workers and developed union consciousness", according to shopstewards.

All of the Unilever companies are

Ndwandwe also believes there is a changing relationship between workers and their foremen in the departments. He says worker participation evolves differently in different departments. For example, some departments elect committees representing shifts with shopstewards participating in the committees. These committees meet as frequently as they decide, to resolve a broad range of issues. "Other departments regularly take time off where the whole department brainstorms on issues pertinent to the life of that department. These sessions are referred to as 'team building' sessions."

At these meetings, workers discuss production and other issues: "The committees or teams do not only discuss production issues, targets etc. Committees have been involved in deciding whether someone should be promoted to foreman, or who should fill certain positions. They can deal with anything affecting the life of the people – they can take whatever shape people want." Some issues are resolved in the department, others are sent to the union/management negotiations forum for the site.

"At department level, shopstewards are increasingly playing a different role – they directly advise line management on a range of issues. They are available for consultation." According to Ndwandwe, this means issues can be resolved before they have to be referred to procedures. "The challenge is to transfer this co-operative relationship to the formal structure of collective bargaining."

What happens if a foreman – most of whom are white – rejects the views of a shopsteward, committees or team? "They can confront the foreman," says Ndwandwe, "and explain he cannot simply choose when to accept the views of the workers." He says there have been conflicts, but in the end the foreman will find the only way is to work with the other workers.

### Workers testing participation

Doctor Ncobela, secretary of the shopstewards committee at the Maydon Wharf site, and a worker at Elida Ponds, says workers are still sceptical about the participative process. "At general meetings, workers did not have a uniform position on rejecting the scheme or



*Doctor Ncobela: workers are still sceptical ... but are testing the forums to see what gains can be made*

*Photo: William Matlala*

amending it. We decided to use developments at Lever Brothers as a way of testing it."

One reason workers were sceptical, says Ncobela, was that management seemed to be avoiding workers' demands. He recalls that union demands for education and training were discussed in negotiations in November 1991, and it was agreed this matter should be referred to a national bargaining forum for Unilever as a whole when one was established. "We believe the participation schemes could be a counter strategy in response to our demands. We had been making those demands for a long time. Then all of a sudden they introduced these schemes, claiming that it covered our demands. Why so urgent? Why so fast?" Ncobela says the participative project was never negotiated with shopstewards or the union.

Still, says Ncobela, workers and the shopstewards as their leaders are testing the forums to see what gains can be made. As an example, he too refers to the election of workers to the company job evaluation committee – but he sees this as a union victory. A problem with job evaluation was raised in the participation forum in a particular department, he says. The shopsteward in that department took the issue to a shopsteward caucus. Since all departments experience

similar problems, shopstewards decided to raise this at a general meeting.

The general meeting resolved to demand equal representation for workers and management on the job evaluation committee. "We had long negotiations last year before management conceded. They also agreed to provide training for the worker representatives on the committee."

Workers also successfully used the participative forums to have matric-level science and maths classes introduced at Lever Brothers, according to Ncobela. "Management is always talking about the need for workers to have science and maths. We discussed this at a general meeting and decided to raise it in these forums. As a result, we now have an organisation called Promat running classes at the company."

### What is the role of the union?

Ndwanwe emphasises the informality of developing a new relationship between workers and management. He distinguishes between formal IR, and informal relations. Formal IR is the sphere of negotiations between union structures and management, and of following agreed procedures. The sphere of informal relations is where the participative forums happen.

Ndwanwe believes the formal IR relations and the informal relations influence each other. "In practice, we have seen co-operation without asking the union to co-operate. You cannot strategise this from the IR structures. The industrial relations climate is not created by the shopstewards and the IR manager – it is created by those who produce commodities." Hence the focus on department-level forums.

This is exactly what the shopstewards criticise. Ndwanwe says the shopstewards have been "involved". Ncobela says the participative process has never been negotiated. Ndwanwe says the process evolves differently in each department. Ncobela says it is "imposed" by management, and that the success of each forum depends on the attitude of that particular manager.

The result, says Ncobela, is that workers may be confused and divided as things develop differently in different departments – and in

different companies on the same site.

Individual workers are not sure whether they have the right *not* to participate – "they think it is part of the conditions of employment and that they are obliged to participate."

Ncobela acknowledges that most of these problems occur at the other companies, rather than at Lever Brothers. But he does fear the participative forums are designed to undermine their union. "Management says the forums are for communication. We say they should use the union and the shopstewards for any communication they want."

Ndwanwe responds by stressing the importance of a strong and credible union presence. "We have instructed the foremen never to act in such a way as to undermine the authority of the union structure on site." He says there is a role for unions in dealing with production issues, but he emphasises the role of the "internal leaders" of the unions, ie the shopstewards. "We regard them as partners in steering our ship towards a productive destination". He is cautious about the role of trade union structures outside the factory: "This process is about company direction, and it involves many who the union does not represent – as well as customers, suppliers, etc." However, "maybe in future this relationship could be formalised through direct talks with the union on some issues," he says.

The shopstewards want more far-reaching participation than provided for by the departmental forums. "The company talks about productivity, but does not open its books for us to have audited. We need to know what the company is doing for the country or investing in the community, then we can talk about productivity. They want us to get involved in production and productivity but not profits or profit sharing. We want to be involved in both."

Other concrete demands the shopstewards believe the company is avoiding are:

- Support in establishing an industrial council in the chemical industry. Unilever did not attend a meeting convened by CWIU to discuss this issue.
- The demand for a centralised forum for all Unilever companies.

□ The demand for a uniform, company-wide training policy and programme negotiated with the union. At Elida Ponds, claims Ncobela, "The young training officer is training people how to do jobs they have already been doing for ten years."

The shopstewards fear that worker participation schemes will lead to contracting out and retrenchments. "We are not sure whether the company is in crisis or not – we have not seen the books," they say. "We believe that company problems can be discussed and sorted out through centralised bargaining. Then, if need be, we can approach the government."

Ndwandwe feels it is positive that workers are demanding an increasing amount of information and participation in decision-making. "I see us responding once the workplace community is ready." The aim, he says, is not to control developments, but rather encourage them to develop spontaneously.

According to Ndwandwe, there is a debate within Lever Brothers about the extent to which workers should participate in decision-making. The mutual value-sharing workshop expressed a joint commitment to "creating and sharing" wealth. "The question is, how do we do this?"

## Challenges

Of the companies we visited in Natal, Unilever – and more particularly Lever Brothers – clearly has the most advanced worker participation programme. It is too early to evaluate fully, but management initiatives do seem to offer genuine opportunities for developing more co-operative relations on the shopfloor and for empowering workers.

However, the situation does pose complex and subtle challenges for the union. There seems to be a mixed attitude towards the union. Managers are trying to establish direct relations with the workers, rather than relating through the union structures, but they are careful to avoid antagonising the union in the process. The emphasis on department-level interaction, on the spontaneous evolution of the forums rather than a negotiated framework, and on the "internal leaders" of the union rather than

external union structures, could develop a momentum that undermines the basic union structures – a collective of all workers at the company with the shopstewards as their mandated representatives, supported by union officials and linkages with workers at other Unilever sites and other chemical companies.

The shopstewards have responded by using union structures – the shopsteward caucus, the general meeting of all workers, the formal negotiating forum – as a base for engaging with the participative forums, to interact with them and test them. At times, an issue emerging in a participative forum is then raised in negotiations (for example, the job evaluation committee). At other times, a general issue is raised through the participative forums (for example, maths and science classes). This strategy serves as a counter to the union-undermining dynamic outlined above. Without this kind of active intervention by the shopstewards and their base, the management initiative would probably lead to *participation* combined with *disempowerment* and *fragmentation*.

The challenge for the shopstewards and their union, once they have evaluated the participation forums, will be to develop their own vision of how participation should function and what it could accomplish, and then take the initiative in negotiating this with management. Such an experiment would have great value for the labour movement as a whole. They will also have to work out how to harness their involvement in the participative forums to their (as yet vaguely formulated) project for much more far-reaching participation: a national Unilever bargaining forum where company policy, open books, profit-sharing, training, and a framework for shopfloor participation can be negotiated.

For the company, the challenge will be whether to accept the implications of participation and move towards substantial partnership with the workers and their union – or to draw the limits at 'management prerogative'. If they do the latter, they are likely to find workers remain sceptical – and refuse to commit themselves to the participation forums or the goal of improving productivity. ☆