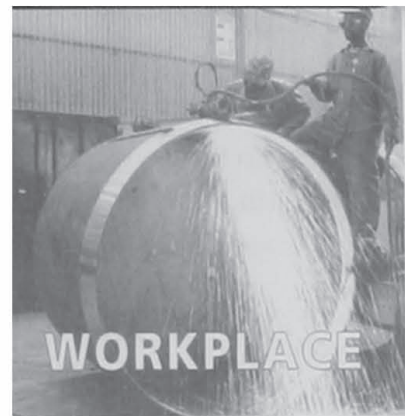


Workplace forums

efficiency and democracy?



Fundamental changes have taken place in the socio-political structure of South Africa since 1990. The biggest change occurred with the outcome of the first democratic elections held in April 1994.

The emphasis then shifted to empowerment of the people through democratisation. Instruments to achieve this included the RDP (ANC, 1994) and progressive labour legislation.

One of the major innovations of the Labour Relations Act, 66 of 1995 is provision for the establishment of Workplace Forums (WPFs).

A workplace forum established in terms of this Chapter:

- ☐ must seek to promote the interests of all employees in the workplace, whether or not they are trade union members;
- ☐ must seek to enhance efficiency in the workplace;
- ☐ is entitled to be consulted by the employer, with a view to reaching consensus about the matters referred to in section 84;
- ☐ is entitled to participate in joint decision-making about matters referred to in section 88.

In the light of the urgent need to combat high unemployment by the creation of jobs as expressed at the recent Jobs Summit, the question may be asked to what extent has the LRA's important

Ruan van der Walt assesses if workplace forums have succeeded in South Africa.

innovation, namely WPFs, succeeded in achieving the objectives of the Act?

East London case studies

A number of organisations that employ 100 or more workers and therefore qualify for the establishment of WPFs were identified in the greater East London area. There are not a large number of such organisations in this area and the scope of the study was further limited by the reluctance among both management and the shopstewards to discuss WPFs with the interviewers who conducted the investigation.

It was found that no WPFs had been established (at the time of the investigation) in any of the organisations included in the study.

The most common reason given for this was that the relevant union in each organisation had made no attempt to initiate the process of establishing a WPF. It was also found that in only one organisation had discussions taken place between the parties to emphasise the importance of a WPF.

In another firm, the monthly paid (non-union) staff had approached management

to form a WPF but clearly did not qualify in terms of the LRA.

The reluctance of the relevant trade unions to trigger the establishment of WPFs was ascribed to their concern that WPFs might undermine or contradict their policies, reduce their bargaining power and that management might possibly co-opt members of the WPFs to do management's bidding

Managements included in the study were also sceptical about WPFs, some believing that management prerogatives would be further reduced and that confidential information could fall in the wrong hands

It was clear from these findings that lack of effective communication and genuine trust between management and labour were still major problems. They do not understand nor accept each other's frames of reference.

The East London area is not unique in the slowness of WPFs taking off. The fact is that in the time since the LRA came into effect, only 57 applications for the establishment of WPFs had been received by the CCMA.

Of these applications 16 were approved, 13 were being processed and 26 were rejected because the applicant trade union(s) did not have the majority representation in the organisation concerned. This is a regrettable state of affairs because ideally the introduction of WPFs should enhance democracy in the workplace through greater worker participation and involvement in decision-making, leading to greater co-operation, labour peace and improved productivity and competitiveness.

Conclusions

It is common cause that job creation is one of the priorities and urgencies for South Africa. Jobs can only be created in a

growing economy. In this regard the Presidential Commission reports that in its view 'unions have as vital a role to play in the economic transformation of the society as they did in the political transformation'. The Commission also reports that the opening up of the South African economy to international competition has spurred firms on to re-examine their performance, accelerate programmes to increase productivity and introduce new forms of work organisation.

There is no possibility of reaching the common objective (ie, job creation) unless management and labour co-operate. The Commission identified several constraints to productivity improvement (on which economic growth largely depends), particularly those concerned with the relations between management and the workforce.

Examples are: authoritarian and racist supervision on the shopfloor, volatile industrial relations including adversarial and hostile relationships between management and unions at plant-level; poor association by workers with issues of productivity; and a general absence of workplace democracy and inadequate worker participation structures.

The Commission notes that considerable progress has been made in overcoming such impediments to productivity improvement, particularly those stemming from employer/employee relations. It goes on to point out that 'Workplace Forums are specifically designed to underpin workplace democracy and worker participation and to strengthen the identification of all layers of the workforce with productivity issues'.

The writer of this article strongly believes that management and unions together must make every effort to

overcome the prejudices that stand in the way of establishing WPFs. It is known that unions and workers are suspicious and fearful of the introduction of changes in work organisation because modern manufacturing methods and productivity enhancement are often associated with job losses.

It is natural that they should be concerned about job security but such concerns can be adequately protected in productivity agreements negotiated at plant-level.

Government has already shown its commitment to ensuring employment security by means of new labour legislation. It is now up to employers and employees to negotiate agreements that will ensure the continued existence and growth of their organisations while at the same time preserving jobs and creating additional job opportunities.

Such negotiations should be entrusted to plant-level structures such as WPFs. Union officials and office-bearers are overextended with their many responsibilities at organising, liaising with government departments, serving on industry-level bargaining councils, etc. Their ranks have also been decimated by many having entered positions in government, business and other organisations.

Union members at plant-level are no longer unsophisticated but have become fully aware of their rights and are knowledgeable on economic issues that concern them. They could play a crucial role in joint decision-making with management in their organisations.

Labour legislation provides that in the absence of collective agreements, WPFs must be consulted and consensus reached in the design of affirmative action plans. WPFs could also play equally important roles in the formulation and

implementation of employment equity programmes.

Workers serving in a WPF will over time gain invaluable insights into all aspects of the operation of the organisation – excellent preparation for future managers.

It is regrettable that WPFs have not yet been utilised for enhancing efficiency and democracy in South African workplaces. They are the ideal structures through which to achieve the co-operative arrangements that are vital for survival and economic success in the international arena.

Given the present precarious state of the economy, resultant high unemployment and lack of job opportunities for new entrants, South Africa now needs an 'economic miracle' similar to that which rebuilt the devastated Germany after World War II. The German *Wirtschaftswunder* was not brought about by the gods but by sacrifices and sustained hard work based on co-operation between employers and trade unions. That period laid the foundation for the prosperity that Germans still enjoy today.

Such co-operation between the various stakeholders can be achieved in South Africa and should initially have the best chances of success at plant-level. ★

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