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# WORKPLACE DEMOCRATISATION: SHOPFLOOR VOICES AND VISIONS FOR EMANCIPATION[1]

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## Introduction:

In 1988 PG Bison, South Africa's leading particle board manufacturer, initiated a multi-faceted change process which was intended to reposition the company in anticipation of the advent of political democracy and the re-integration of the South African economy into a highly competitive global economy. Their "continuous improvement" process, nicknamed Total Productivity and Quality (TPQ) involved the establishment of, among others, participative processes, company values and work teams called "in-a-groups". Through these initiatives the company was hoping to elicit the workers' voluntary co-operation and involvement in performance enhancing activities.

In 1991 Nampak Polyfoil, a Johannesburg-based factory owned by printing and packaging group Nampak Limited initiated a similar, but less ambitious, initiative which was called "the change process" which also promised workers greater participation in decision-making.

The study, which was conducted at the Piet Retief plant of PG Bison and at Nampak Polyfoil, aimed at examining the responses of the Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PPWAWU)[2] to these managerial strategies. Material for the sudy was gathered through in-depth interviews with shop stewards, managers and union officials. In addition, 31 Nampak Polyfoil workers and 41 at PG Bison were surveyed to get their views on a variety of subjects related to the topic.

The study found differences between the way the national union, on the one hand, and shopfloor workers and their shop stewards, on the other, responded to these strategies. This paper discusses the responses of unionised workers and concludes that workers are not merely passive objects to be manipulated by national union leaders as Michels (1959) has suggested. On the contrary, unionised workers have an interest in union policy-making, particularly on issues which affect them directly on the shopfloor. The research showed that union decision-making on shopfloor issues is always a contested issue between the national leadership on the one hand, and unionised workers, on the other. In the case of PG Bison, union members went to the extent of defying a national union decision not to get involved in the management-initiated change programme. (Buhlungu, 1996: 148)

But the workers' intervention in union policy-making was not confined to defiance of the national leadership. As this paper will show, workers and their shop stewards went further to debate an alternative vision of the workplace which was based on their notions of democracy, fairness and justice.

For many workers, particularly those organised under the the post-1973 unions, workplace democratisation was not only about idealised notions of participation in decision-making at work. It was also about practical steps to dismantle what Von Holdt (forthcoming) has termed "apartheid workplace regimes", workplace social structures which "allocated rights and resources unequally among differently socialised actors" (forthcoming: 201)
The growth of monopoly capitalism in South Africa in the 1950s and the 1960s had created the material conditions for the development of militant unionism which was rooted on the shopfloor. By the mid-1970s the struggles waged by black workers on the shopfloor had shifted the balance of forces and made unionism a "permanent feature of industry". (Webster, 1985: 150) Since the mid-1980s the struggles of the independent unions have consolidated and deepened organisation on the shop floor. Not only were these struggles about improving wages and working conditions, but in some cases, the struggles began to pose questions about control of the workplaces, or what Goodrich (1920) has termed 'interfering with the employer's business'. (1920: 54 - 6) Such was the confidence of the

independent unions that at its inaugural congress in 1985 the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) called for "workers control and management of production". (COSATU, 1985)

Debates within the labour movement, particularly in COSATU, have always tried to establish a link between the what has been termed 'worker control and management of production' and the struggle for socialism. These debates have tended to see the achievement of worker control of production as the next phase of the trade union struggle at the workplace. As Elijah Barayi, former president of COSATU put it,

> The workers' struggle for socialism has already begun. Finally socialism means workers having control over their own lives. To control our own lives, workers need to control everything that affects our lives. This struggle for control is going on all the time. It is one of the principles of COSATU and is something we fight to deepen and extend every day. Whether it is the mineworkers bringing their wives to the hostels or SAB workers striking because bosses are making a unilateral decision or workers fighting to throw out a rotten leadership in their union or the working class involved in building democratic community structures or whatever - it is all about control. And socialism is about workers controlling. (COSATU, 1987: 6)

But South African trade unions have so far failed to develop a coherent strategy for worker control or workplace democracy, with the result that unions have lost the initiative to management. (Buhlungu, 1996; Barret, 1993) PPWAWU officials acknowledged that the union had no policy on workplace democratisation and that instead the union tended to react to managerial strategies and initiatives. These responses are *ad hoc* and defensive in nature and emanate from fears that such managerial strategies hold the danger of dampening worker militancy and co-opting the unions' membership.

In contrast to the defensiveness of the national union, shopfloor workers and shop stewards have been engaging with the new managerial initiatives through discussions and participation in worker-management structures set up for that purpose. What this engagement indicates is not whether or not workers face co-option by management. Rather it is consistent with the workers' experience of struggle in a capitalist workplace, namely,

that they have to work within the system in order to understand it and to oppose it effectively when they are unable to win meaningful gains. But most importantly, workers' experience of the capitalist labour process is always contradictory and always involves 'working the system'. Although they oppose the capitalism's dehumanising and exploitative aspects, workers also find that they have to co-operate with capital at the point of production.

Thus engagement was the only way workers could understand the opportunities and limitations of management's initiatives. In the course of such engagement workers were able to develop a critique of the initiatives and debate an alternative vision of workplace democratisation. Although these debates have not resulted in a concrete strategy, this study found elements of a workers' vision of workplace democratisation which could lay the foundations for a union-wide strategy.

The significance of the workers' vision is fourfold. Firstly, it goes beyond process issues and begins to raise questions and make practical suggestions on the content of workplace democratisation. They are also debating and defining what meaningful participation is, what issues to participate in, etc. The research established that the workers' notion of participation is very different from that of management.

Secondly, the vision points to the beginning of a new phase of struggle for the union movement where workers attempt to influence and change power relations on the shopfloor by focusing on concrete issues and problems over and above wages and conditions of employment.

Thirdly, it shows the extent to which debate among workers themselves has deepened on the issue of control and democracy in the workplace. There is an awareness among workers that they can and should use the power they have acquired in struggles over the years to demand a greater say in decision-making in their companies.

Fourthly, it challenges the notion that workers cannot engage in strategic debates and union policy-making, particularly on issues which affect them directly at the point of production. This contradicts Michels' (1959) notion of an "iron law of oligarchy" which is born of the general apathy, ignorance and lack of skills among the rank-and-file and the skills and greed for power of full-time officials. (1959: 205) The workers interest in decision-making on shopfloor issues confirms Lane's (1974) observation that although the union and the rank-and-file have an identical concern in wanting to maximise the price of labour power and the conditions under which it is used, the union's concern tends to be at the level of abstraction whereas workers tend to be concerned with the generalities as well as the finer details of how their labour power is utilised. (1974: 189) Lane goes further to argue that:

> The union's *general* concern with price entailed treating labour power in the abstract. The rank and file's additional concern with *particularities* - because it, rather than the union, was the embodiment of labour power - meant that its disposal, far from being abstract, was an intimate part of its life experience. The upshot of this discrepancy was that the range of what the rank and file considered legitimate was wider than the range considered legitimate by the union. For the union, wage issues were eminently legitimate because they lent themselves to negotiations in abstract arithmetical terms. Issues related to managerial authority could not be reduced to pounds and pence and tended therefore not to be negotiated. (1974: 189)

It is is this concern with particularities which explains the interest shown by rank and file workers in the politics of workplace democratisation. Theories of bureaucracy and oligarchy fail to take account of this point are are therefore not useful for understanding union engagement in production politics because they underestimate the rank-and-file's interest and capacity to engage in strategic debates on these issues.

**The Politics of Workplace Democracy: Voices from the shopfloor**

It is important to begin by situating the discussion in the context of capitalist production where relations between workers and capitalists are unequal. Management, as agents of the owners of capital, have the right to plan, direct and control production while workers have to do the actual work of producing goods by combining their labour power with other

forces of production. In this case their labour becomes a commodity bought by the capitalist to be used in a way the capitalist sees fit. It is here that Edwards (1979), in his discussion of co-ordination and control in different forms of social production, locates the question of control and participation in decision-making in capitalist production:

> (T)here is a presumption, indeed a contractual right backed by legal force, for the capitalist, as owner of the purchased labor power, to direct its use. A corollary presumption (again backed by legal force) follows: that the workers whose labor power has been purchased have no right to participate in the conception and planning of production. Coordination occurs in capitalist production as it must inevitably occur in all social production, but it takes the form of top-down coordination, for the exercise of which the top (capitalists) must be able to control the bottom (workers). In analysing capitalist production, then, it is more appropriate to speak of control than coordination, although of course, control is a means of coordination. (Edwards, 1979: 17)

The question of worker participation and industrial democracy therefore centres around whether or not workers should have the right to 'participate in the conception and planning of production'. It is generally acknowledged in all the literature that worker participation or industrial democracy or workers' control of industry is a matter that goes beyond what Clegg (1960) calls 'pressure group industrial democracy' or 'democracy through collective bargaining'. (1960: 131) Debates on worker participation and industrial democracy are concerned about challenging or posing questions about management's right to manage or the so-called prerogative to control and run production. (Goodrich, 1920; Maller, 1992)

Clegg identifies two schools of thought in the debate on industrial democracy, namely, the reformists and the revolutionaries. According to this characterisation the reformists argue that industrial democracy could be achieved through various forms of worker participation schemes in management, while revolutionaries believe true industrial democracy can only be achieved once capitalism has been destroyed and replaced by a system of worker self-government. (Clegg, 1960: 131-2) But in practice issues are not as clear-cut as the above characterisation seems to suggest. In the past debates in COSATU tended towards a position which saw industrial democracy as an incremental process which was an outcome

of ongoing struggles in the workplace. However, there was the notion that an ideal form of industrial democracy could only be achieved under socialism.

While the collapse of East European socialism has dampened the enthusiasm of some in the leadership of the labour movement for the idea, South African workers continue to pose questions around the issue of control in an attempt to push back the frontier of control. The democratisation of national politics has given further impetus to these debates among shop floor workers. As one Nampak Polyfoil shop steward put it,

> I'm committed to change because the whole South Africa is changing. Why must we stay like this? *(Irene Lazarus, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil)*

An important feature of both factories covered in this study is that they, like most South African factories, have a history of an autocratic management style and racism. The workers and shop stewards interviewed recalled a history a racism, unfair dismissals, harassment and poor wages and working conditions. All of them said they joined the union to fight or to correct one or all these problems. As one Nampak Polyfoil worker explained,

> I joined the union because management was harassing us. So I joined for security and protection. I also wanted to join other workers to fight apartheid at this factory. *(Worker No. 26, Nampak Polyfoil)*

In both factories management introduced their experiments in worker participation in a context where the union had won a lot of power for its members, thus earning it a great deal of legitimacy and loyalty among the workers. Even at PG Bison where union shopfloor structures were relatively weak the union still had the ability to challenge management and represent workers effectively on a number of issues, like wages, conditions of employment and grievances and disciplinary cases. Where shopfloor structures were ineffective workers could still rely on union branch and national structures to intervene on their behalf. This legitimacy and power of the union derived from the union's effective representation of workers' interests as well as well as the democratic character of union governance and decision-making. By contrast, workers believed that

management could not be trusted to represent or promote their interests. In the eyes of many workers management was the oppressor and exploiter. The chairperson of the Nampak Polyfoil shop stewards committee was not exaggerating in his comments about the union's credibility among the workers when he asserted:

> I am confident that workers listen to us and they respect us more than they would listen to whatever management will say. We believe that we do have a direct influence with the workers, and not actually in terms of dictating to them, but if we show them things from our own point of view. *(Zimi Masuku, shop stewards' chairperson, Nampak Polyfoil)*

A PG Bison worker expressed the same sentiment in different words:

> My view is that management started TPQ because they saw that they were losing power. So they thought TPQ would satisfy the demands of the workers and stop them from demanding more power. *(Worker No. 25, PG Bison)*

But in both cases this power by the workers and their union did not constitute a threat to management's right to manage or control production. Why then, did management introduce worker participation? Cressey, Eldridge and MacInnes (1985) give an explanation which has relevance for understanding why management in South Africa are introducing worker participation. In their research in six British factories from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s they found that management had opted for a new strategy because of 'instability, change and turbulence' which was evident in these factories. Such instability and turbulence, they argued, promotes challenges to normal management policies and practices, thus forcing capital to look for new strategies. The objective of such new strategies is to find a 'working consensus' and gain legitimacy for their authority because when management ceases to manage through consensus and legitimate authority the instability becomes a crisis. (Cressey, Eldridge and MacInnes, 1985: 143)

While the conditions and some of the crises faced by Nampak and PG Bison management may differ from the 'models of crises' identified by Cressey et al in their study of British

industry, South African industry has been experiencing instability, change and turbulence for a number of years now. (Von Holdt, 1993: 52) Thus it is possible to arrive at a similar conclusion that Nampak Polyfoil, PG Bison and indeed, all South African companies that have embraced worker participation and similar schemes conceive of these as as political strategies to 'gain a working consensus' on the shop floor and reproduce managerial control.

A number of possible reasons why management introduced worker participation were included in a questionnaire for workers and in each case workers were given the option to 'agree', 'disagree' or indicate if they were 'not sure'. Table 1 below looks at responses to these and the results clearly indicate that most workers remain suspicious of management's intentions and believe that management is simply trying to win their co-operation in an effort to improve productivity without really giving workers anything meaningful in return. The results also point to a very strong fear that management is trying to weaken or undermine the union.[3]

The findings are particularly pertinent here as they illustrate not only the factors which led to the disillusionment of the workers, but they also highlight important issues related to the concerns and aspirations of workers on the shopfloor.

***Table 1: Why did management introduce worker participation?:***

*1. "Management is sincere about involving workers in decision-making"*

| Factory (sample) | Agree (%) | Not Sure (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 27.5 | - | 72.5 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 38.7 | 6.5 | 54.8 |

*2. "They want to divide and weaken the union"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 72.5 | 7.5 | 20 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 48.4 | 16.1 | 35.5 |

*3. "They just want workers to increase productivity"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 95 | 2.5 | 2.5 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 90.3 | 3.2 | 6.5 |

*4. "They want workers to be loyal to the company"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 92.5 | 2.5 | 5 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 93.5 | - | 6.5 |

*5. "Management has not really changed. This is just one of their tricks to co-opt workers"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 90 | 2.5 | 7.5 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 71 | 12.9 | 16.1 |

It will be noted from this table that the responses of the workers are, with a few exceptions at Nampak Polyfoil, generally negative. They also suggest that workers were suspicious of management's intentions. This suspicion appears to arise from the from their experience of what they regard as management's lack of good faith and unwillingness to relinquish their control on the shopfloor. As one Nampak Polyfoil shop steward put it,

> (T)here is fear from management that we as workers want to take control of the running of the factory. Also, on our side, we were suspicious that whatever white people may say, they are still white people and they are oppressors and there will be a motive behind what they are saying to us. At that time we took decisions on issues that needed to be done practically. But what we saw was that in most cases management was making fools of us. They would say, 'yes, we will do this', but at the end of the day when they were supposed to take practical action we would find that they were not abiding by decisions. *(Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil)*

Yet Nampak Polyfoil workers believed that, through the use of power, they could make some gains by engaging in the process irrespective of managements' agenda. This probably comes from the workers' experience of the independent union movement's tradition of engaging management, when the balance of power is favourable, in order to win incremental gains, and blocking management programmes when the balance of power is not favourable. This would seem to suggest that workers on the shopfloor make conscious choices on whether to engage or to embark on militant abstentionism. In other words,

militant abstentionism was never conceived of as an approach appropriate for all situations, nor was engagement regarded as a universally undesirable strategy. A more plausible explanation it that the tradition of shopfloor unionism, of which PPWAWU members are part, has taught workers to embark on either of these strategies after carefully considering the costs and benefits of each strategy as well as the balance of power in the relationship between capital and labour. The difference between the two factories seems to indicate that where workers have power and believe that the balance of power is in their favour, they tend to favour a strategy of engagement. This becomes clear in the case of Nampak Polyfoil where, according to a shop steward, management approached the workers again in 1993 suggesting that the change process be revived. The workers agreed to become involved in the process once again in order to test it. The shop steward says the workers said,

> '(W)e will see what management's aims concerning this thing, whether they want to use us as slaves to jack up their production. Then if that is the case they will be surprised to see what will happen because everything can just come to a standstill'. And they have also said, 'it is never too late to take a step back'. (*Zimi Masuku, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

On the other hand, where workers do not have power and do not believe that the balance of power is in their favour, the preference for militant abstentionism tends to be greater than for engagement. PG Bison's situation after the suspension of TPQ is a typical example of this scenario.

**A Different Vision:**

Workers' and shop stewards' notion of what worker participation or industrial democracy is, or should be, had as its starting point a critique of what management was trying to do. In both cases management's initial offer to allow worker participation raised excitement and expectations among many workers because management promised to bring about many changes on the shop floor and in the way the companies were run. According to Sipho Kubheka, a former general secretary of the union, these were long-standing demands by the

workers. He argues that because the unions had failed to prepare a clear programme of action on worker participation and control, management then took these demands and turned them into "weapons of management, to further deepen their controlling process".[4] At PG Bison TPQ promised to end racial discrimination, to guarantee life-long employment, participation in decision-making structures right up to the board of directors, incentive bonus schemes, and a greater say for workers around their specific jobs. But when the process failed to produce results workers became critical and in both factories this led them to withdraw their support. At PG Bison the workers waited for three years to see results but none of the promises materialised. Instead new practices, like 'multi-skilling', which were not acceptable to workers were introduced, and shop stewards became alienated from the workers. As one PG Bison worker commented later,

> When TPQ came it sounded very good. We thought that it would bring us many good things. But now it is clear that we cannot get any good from TPQ. (*Worker No. 13, PG Bison*)

A similar situation occurred at Nampak Polyfoil when the change process failed to translate into real benefits for the workers. Workers began to feel that the change process was a strategy by management to adapt to changing circumstances, nationally and internationally, rather than a sincere attempt to concede some of their prerogatives to the workers:

> The change process was introduced because management saw apartheid is dying and competition will grow. They realised that if they are not up to standard they will lose the market. It is not because they care about the workers. (Worker No. 26, Nampak Polyfoil)

Tables 2 and 3 below look at responses to questions about the impact of the change processes on conditions and practices on the shopfloor. The significance of these results, however, is that they serve as an explanation of why the workers withdrew their support by boycotting the processes. Thus the results in these tables give an indication of the

yardsticks by which the workers measured the benefits, or lack thereof, of the change processes.

***Table 2: Worker Attitudes to Management-initiated Participation:***

*"Since the introduction of worker participation ..."*

*1. "The attitude of management towards workers has improved?"*

| Factory (sample) | Agree (%) | Not Sure (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 10 | - | 90 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 52 | - | 48 |

*2. "Workers are treated better?"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 12 | - | 88 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 61 | - | 39 |

*3. "I now enjoy my job and can take decisions on how to do it better?"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 7 | 2 | 90 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 48 | - | 52 |

*4. "Working conditions have improved"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 10 | 2 | 88 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 42 | - | 58 |

*5. "Wages have improved"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | - | 2 | 98 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 6.5 | 3 | 90 |

*6. "Workers have more say in running the factory"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | - | 2 | 98 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 29 | 6.5 | 64.5 |

*7. "Management talks nicely but no action is taken to improve conditions"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 95 | - | 5 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 81 | - | 19 |

Table 3 looks at shop stewards and the role that they played. It is significant to note the difference in responses between the two factories in this table. This seems to indicate the degree to which the shop stewards had become alienated from their membership. In other words, the results show a greater degree of democratic rapture, weakness and disorganisation at PG Bison compared to Nampak Polyfoil.

***Table 3: Did Management Initiated Participation Affect Your Shop Stewards?:***

*"Did worker participation make shop stewards More, or Less accountable to workers?"*

| **Factory (sample)** | **More (%)** | **Less (%)** | **Not Sure (%)** | **Did Not Affect (%)** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | 5 | 71 | 12 | 12 |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | 23 | 16 | 10 | 50 |

It will be noted from both Table 2 and Table 3 that the degree of disenchantment at PG Bison was much higher than at Nampak Polyfoil. This is probably explained by the fact that at PG Bison the process had had a longer life span and the workers had given it a longer chance to prove itself, whereas at Polyfoil the process was boycotted even before some aspects of it could be implemented and be subjected to scrutiny. What seems to have influenced the decision of the Nampak Polyfoil workers was failure of management to make an unequivocal commitment to worker participation, and the intervention by influential shop stewards who argued that the process would never deliver results because management was not committed to change. These shop stewards also pointed out to workers that the change process was weakening the union and that shop stewards were no longer performing their duties effectively. However, the results also show that even though the debate was won by the majority faction led by these shop stewards, there were still some workers who either believed that through power they could wring out some concessions from management or who saw opportunities for themselves in the change process.[5]

The suspension of the processes came after workers had made an assessment of the costs and benefits to themselves as individuals and as a collective. While most workers and shop stewards complained that most of the issues agreed in discussions with management were not implemented, they felt that even those aspects that were implemented by management were introduced in a way that brought little, if any, benefit to the workers. At PG Bison the only aspects of TPQ which were implemented were the incentive bonus, the in-a-groups (teams) and adult literacy classes. In February 1994 the adult literacy classes were the only aspect of TPQ which remained. A shop steward at PG Bison believes that the in-a-groups failed because management used the wrong approach in implementing them:

> (T)hey introduced the in-a-groups, but mainly at the top level, at management level. But they failed to introduce the groups among the workers. Instead they introduced multi-skilling. (*Qoqozulu Mngomezulu, shop steward, PG Bison*)

The groups were supposed to be semi-autonomous work groups which allowed workers greater freedom and power to discuss and take decisions about their own jobs so that they could do them better. Instead, they were seen by many workers to be another management structure whose job was to convey further instructions to the shop floor. So they were rejected by the workers. Thus any hopes by workers that TPQ would allow them more say in decision-making were dashed and the ubiquitous foremen and supervisors continued to rule supreme on the shop floor. When the process was introduced supervisors and foremen felt threatened by the prospect of workers assuming greater responsibility for their own jobs. According to shop stewards supervisors and foremen kept reminding workers that "TPQ is at the training centre (where the value-sharing sessions were held), and not in the plant".[6] At Nampak Polyfoil first line managers also became apprehensive, fearing for their jobs in the event of more decision-making powers being delegated to workers in their work stations. Managing director, Mr de Jongh referred to these fears during an interview.

> I would not be surprised if there is a manager or two, or a supervisor who wants to sabotage the process. They would also like to sabotage it because they are seeing it as a threat. (*Loutjie de Jongh, managing director, Nampak Polyfoil*)

For supervisors and foremen at PG Bison, one way of sabotaging TPQ was to cling to their powers to decide and direct the activities of the workers on the shopfloor. As one shop steward explained,

> Here you are not able to take decisions regarding your own work and you have no role in higher decisions....They have blocked all opportunities for workers to become involved in decision-making. The supervisors are keeping some of those job-related powers for themselves. (*Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PG Bison*)

The 'multi-skilling' that management introduced was, in fact, multi-tasking, a practice which became very unpopular among workers and which was to lead to the demise of TPQ at the factory. A shop steward explained how 'multi-skilling' worked,

> Some of the things that were happening were unacceptable to the workers. Management introduced new rules without consultation. Like they introduced multi-skilling and many other things. Multi-skilling caused many problems for workers. For example, they would take a job that was done by four people and give it to two people. Then they would take the other two to another department. So you would find that two workers were doing the job of four workers. When management introduced this multi-skilling the manager told us that the remaining two workers would share the wages of the two other workers. But as time went on it became clear that nothing was going to happen. So it created serious problems for the workers and that is when the workers started complaining about TPQ. (*Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PG Bison*)

As far as the incentive bonus is concerned many workers said they had never received it. Those who had received it at some stage said management had stopped it because they claimed production was low.

Since the suspension of Nampak Polyfoil's change process management has tried to revive it by introducing a production bonus and 'natural working teams'. It is difficult to assess these because at the time of the study both had just been introduced. But many workers and shop stewards expressed the view that they would support team-working provided the positions of supervisors and team leaders [7] were phased out and their powers delegated to the teams. The teams would then elect team leaders or co-ordinators from within their

ranks who would have a fixed term of office. With regard to the incentive bonus many workers did not even know about it. Those who did felt that the conditions set for getting the bonus were too strict and that this would make it impossible for most workers to get it. Others felt the workers did not have the power or access to information for them to be able to verify whether or not they were meeting the production targets which entitle them to receive the bonus.

However, the general problem at Polyfoil was that workers and shop stewards felt management was not acting in good faith. The first phase of the change process was the discussion of values which would serve as guidelines for acceptable conduct and practice by all in the company. These discussions deadlocked, particularly on the question of participation by workers, and so the values could not be finalised. Workers then withdrew their support for the process. But management later tried to introduced 'natural working teams' without consulting the workers.

> Instead of addressing those values, management came up with a new system of natural working teams which they had discussed and finalised. So what they expected from us was to just accept the new system and implement it. So at the moment we are still waiting for them to implement this system because it is their system. (*Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

The workers' criticisms of the change processes point to a major weakness of the processes at PG Bison and Nampak Polyfoil, namely, that, at best, the changes were half-hearted and cosmetic. Management was not prepared to concede any more control of the labour process than that which the workers had wrestled from them through struggle. Their objective was to restructure and reinforce the managerial prerogative in a situation where their credibility was at an all-time low. This is illustrated by management practices and statements on three issues - work teams, participation and the flattening of hierarchies of control. While PG Bison workers believed that the in-a-groups (work teams) should

provide an opportunity for workers to "have a say in planning their tasks"[8], engineering department manager, D. Ferreira argued for a different role for the in-a-groups:

> In-a-groups should be the channel to communicate to workers, to transmit information. For example, a manager using them to tell people to wear earmuffs. We must do like the Japanese do. But you can't get things working immediately. We couldn't immediately delegate authority because workers do not have the information and decision-making background. Management has got the information. (*D. Ferreira, engineering departmental manager, PG Bison*)

This statement was simultaneously an argument in favour of maintaining the existing hierarchies of control and other Taylorist practices. In short, it was an argument in favour of the separation between conception and execution, which flies in the face of the group's commitment to a participatory style of management. Furthermore, it would seem that Ferreira was echoing the sentiments of many his colleagues in management. Where these groups were established they were used for precisely the same purpose that he had in mind. A shop steward gave an account of his experience of an in-a-group.

> They (in-a-groups) were not in all departments, but they were there in a number of departments. It happened by the MD, Andries Vorster, calling you, "so and so, come to my office quickly". When you get there he would dictate and dictate and tell you, "this and that I don't like". That would be an in-a-group. For example, he would call Zeph, myself (at the time not being a shop steward), Nqaba and Mathebula. They would call us 'seniors' among the black workers. He would then tell us, "this and that I do not want to see". (*Andries Fakude, shop steward, PG Bison*)

Nampak Polyfoil's managing director, Mr de Jongh, also argued for a clear separation between conception and execution, pointing out that "management has got a job to do and the workers have got a job to do". He went to argue that,

> I haven't been to university for eight years for nothing. I have gone there to be equipped to have the ability to make certain decisions....I don't believe that it is worth the energy to discuss things with people that do not understand the implications and that do not have a direct contribution to make towards getting to a

> positive outcome or a specific outcome....To ask other people where to spend the money in terms of greater output other than extruder or something like that, I don't think that they have the ability to make that decision. And **I don't know what the good is of asking the people anyway**. (*Loutjie de Jongh, managing director, Nampak Polyfoil*)

At both factories these were the problems and contradictory statements which convinced workers that management was not ready to embark on meaningful change. It was in the process of criticising management-initiated participatory processes that workers began to develop their own notions of workplace democratisation. What follows below is a discussion of those notions of democratisation and their potential to become the foundation of a new union vision for workplace democratisation.

**'We Need a Democratic Management Team'**

Another notable finding of the research is that workers hold moderate views on industrial democracy which are similar to those held by what Clegg calls the 'reformist industrial democrats' who maintain that industrial democracy can be achieved by worker participation in management without changing the ownership of the means of production. (1960: 132)

Workers were given three statements and were asked to indicate if they 'agree', 'not sure' or 'disagree' with each statement.

*Table 4: Who Should Make Decisions in the Workplace?:*

*1. "Management in our company knows best and should make all company decisions"*

| Factory (sample) | Agree (%) | Not Sure (%) | Disagree (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | **2.4** | -- | **96.6** |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | **6.5** | -- | **93.5** |

*2. "Workers have contributed to building the company and should therefore run it jointly with management"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | **100** | -- | -- |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | **100** | -- | -- |

*3. "There is no need for management. Workers can and should run the company themselves"*

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| PG Bison (41) | **7.3** | -- | **92.7** |
| NP Polyfoil (31) | **25.8** | -- | **74.2** |

The responses show that most workers reject the notion that 'management knows all and should therefore take all decisions'. [9] But what is more significant is that most workers in both factories rejected the notion of workers running the factory on their own and, instead showed a strong preference for joint control and management. As one PG Bison worker put it,

> We need management. Workers cannot run the factory alone. The only problem is that the present management is unjust. There must be someone in charge. We need a democratic management team. (*Worker No. 35, PG Bison*)

These results also seem to stand in stark contrast to present COSATU policy and the rhetoric of some unionists, particularly during the 1980s, which called for worker control of production in a socialist system. It is not clear whether these results indicate a shift by workers away from socialism or whether this has always been the view of rank and file union members. But what can be said at this stage is that the result are consistent with workers' past experience and union practice of making winnable demands which achieve incremental gains thus enabling workers to push back the frontier of control. If it is indeed the case that workers view the struggle for industrial democracy, and trade union struggles in general, as being the art of the possible, then these results do not necessarily negate COSATU's goal of destroying capitalism and ushering in a socialist system. But they do reflect a more pragmatic approach to workplace democratisation.

Discussions with shop stewards throw some light on how the workers would like to be involved in decision-making. They believe that the workers have a lot to contribute towards the success of the company. A PG Bison shop steward feels that management are not making use of workers' ideas,

> Management should not just assume that because workers are on the factory floor they have nothing to contribute. I think that is very important for the success of a process like this. Workers should be given powers to do certain things or to implement certain decisions themselves, or they should be allowed to have a say in decision-making. (*Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PB Gison*)

This desire to participate is expressed in relation to two levels of the factory, namely, on the shop floor around the jobs that workers do, and at the level of the factory as an economic entity. The demand for participation on the shop floor is often made because workers believe they know their jobs well enough to take the right decisions and to ensure that the production process runs smoothly. Workers were very unhappy with the irrationalities of the current system of decision-making on the shop floor and resented the powers that supervisors and team leaders wielded. There was a view that team-working (whether in natural working teams or in-a-groups) would allow workers to be more creative, responsible and efficient. Workers and shop stewards argued that this autonomy in the labour process would create ideal conditions for them to apply their tacit skills, knowledge and experience accumulated informally through continuous involvement in the labour process, to improve efficiency and productivity. A shop steward put it cogently in her observation that,

> If we work in teams you know where you work, what you must do in your team. You don't have to go around and ask the supervisor, 'now it is like this, what must I do?'. You talk to your team, you discuss your problem, you discuss about the work. That is the way I understand it. (*Irene Lazarus, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

Workers at PG Bison had a similar view. This sentiment was expressed in a group discussion with shop stewards about the role of the in-a-groups.

> Workers thought the in-a-groups would plan their work. But the groups were used to instruct workers, not to allow them a say in planning their tasks. (*Group interview with PG Bison shop stewards*)

In both cases management desperately wanted to access the tacit skills of workers and this was the motivation for setting up the work teams. But they did not want to create what workers believed to be the necessary for conditions accessing those skills, namely, the dismantling of the primary structures of managerial control, in the form of team leaders, supervisors and foremen, and the delegation of powers previously vested in these structures to the workers themselves. As one Nampak Polyfoil shop steward put it,

> The people should control themselves so that they can be efficient, because now these supervisors and the team leaders are oppressing the people and they are doing nothing at the end of the day. When they knock off here they are having more money than what I got, and I'm doing the whole job. In terms of quality and proper bags that should be packed, the operator is responsible for that job. If that job can be rejected by the customer the operator suffers at the end of the day. And now where does the quality start? It starts from extrusion, goes to the quality controllers for check up and is then sent to bagging. Now all that chain is not being considered. Also, within that chain there is a quality manager. But now the poor operator must come and suffer at the end of the day, sit here with a final written warning, a written warning, at the end of the day loses the job. (*Beljium Makhabane, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

As the above statement makes clear, the demand for more participation by workers around their jobs, whether through teams or as individuals, is linked to another, namely, that management hierarchies be flattened. At PG Bison workers believed that a start could be made by doing away with supervisors and foremen while at Polyfoil workers wanted to do away with team leaders and supervisors. In both cases team leaders, supervisors and foremen were said to be the ones most vehemently opposed to change on the shop floor.

However, while getting rid of team leaders, supervisors and foremen was seen as a solution by some workers, there were those who argued that it does not solve the problem at all.

> Let me tell you something that is so easy. You can say, 'yes, let's get rid of these two people, the supervisor and the team leader'. There will be one person who is going to be involved because if they still impose instructions to the people, that is not going to stop when they take the supervisor and the team leader. It will remain the same. Someone else will take over that job. So now the right thing that we think

> is going to solve the problem is to have representatives in those [management] structures. (*Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

Thus for some workers the demand to participate on the shopfloor was linked to one for participation at higher levels of decision-making. In both cases the processes which management introduced did not provide for participation in company-wide decision-making. This is not to suggest that TPQ and the change process had a clear strategy of participation on the shopfloor either. However, both processes did provide for some form of *pseudo* participation on the shopfloor because, as argued above, management needed to win the consent and co-operation of the workforce in the labour process. A Nampak Polyfoil shop steward summarized the rationale for workers wanting to participate in factory/company level decision-making:

> We wanted to be represented in the decision-making structures of the company, from the general manager's structure down to the team leaders' structure on the shop floor. Our view was that whenever Mr de Jongh [general manager] is going to do anything in the company there must be a committee of worker representatives that he consults with. We did not want things to come down to us as matters that have already been decided upon, coming to us via certain people, namely from the general manager to the operations manager who will then take it to the middle mangers, then the middle managers taking it to the supervisors, then supervisors taking it down to us as instructions saying, 'we are doing this'....We wanted somebody who would be there and, if there was a need to table a proposal from the workers, that person would be able to table those proposals as part of the decision-making process. The purpose of such representation would be to ensure that the views of the workers are taken account of when decisions are being made. (*Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

This desire to participate derives from worker's experience of democracy in a trade union, a hybrid of participatory and representative democracy where rank and file workers have representation in all decision-making structures and where those at the top do not impose decisions from the top down. This particular demand indicates that management has a credibility crisis as workers feel they cannot trust management to take the right and just decisions to accommodate all interests within the company. As Table 4 above suggests, workers are not demanding participation because they are waging an ideological battle to bring down the system of capitalism in order to replace it with some kind of utopian system

of workers' control of the means of production. In response to another question which asked workers to list three things that would have to be done to make their factory democratic, the majority of workers at both factories put joint decision-making on top of the list. This was followed by such other demands as full disclosure of all information, promotion opportunities for blacks, education and training opportunities, an end to racial discrimination and favouritism, better wages, housing subsidies, equal pay for equal work and team working to replace team leaders and supervisors.[10]

As stated earlier the national union played no role in assisting the workers and the shop stewards to develop a response to the new strategies of management. The only union intervention some shop stewards could recall was a discussion paper written by PPWAWU unionists, Welcome Ntshangase and Apolis Solomons, which identified three options for the union: stand back and let it happen, obstruct the process or become centrally involved.[11] For most shop stewards the paper was useful only insofar as it identified and discussed the options. Beyond that they felt the union was not giving any guidance in defining the content of a response to the initiatives of management. A Nampak Polyfoil shop steward complained that most of their full-time union officials did not have enough skills to help workers respond to the change process.

> (S)ometimes it brings us to the same level. You find that we are on the same level of understanding, and no one is in a position to give any advice. You find management doing whatever they want. (*Themba Tiya, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil*)

Notwithstanding this and other weaknesses facing the union, workers on the shop floor are in the process of developing a framework which could become the foundation of their vision of industrial democracy. The results of the workers' survey as well as interviews with shop stewards would seem to suggest that from the perspective of union members and shopfloor leadership, shopfloor democratisation cannot be divorced from the struggles they have been fighting over the years. From this point of view democratisation is about making gains on bread and butter issues and conditions of employment, removing discriminatory practices and winning more autonomy and control in the labour process and at higher levels company decision-making. Thus the key elements of this emerging framework are:

a) **Workers' involvement in decision-making at all levels.** (In some instances this may involve the flattening management hierarchies, particularly on the shop floor. It also entails developing, jointly with the workers, better systems of consultation and communication).

b) **Full disclosure of all information.**

c) **Better opportunities for all workers.** (This includes education, training, promotions).

d) **Fair rewards and incentive schemes.** (Including wages and bonuses).

e) **Fair and equal treatment for all.** (No racial discrimination, efforts to improve the living standards of workers as well as their physical working conditions, fair grading systems, no favouritism, no victimisation).

It will be noted from the above that workers do not separate their demand for democratisation from bread and butter demands. Consequently, in their view the struggle for workplace democratisation is not separate from their current struggles. It is about expanding their influence on the shopfloor and contesting the power of management to make unilateral decisions. In addition, the union is seen as one of the many forms of democratic expression for workers in a democratic workplace. Conceived of in this way, workplace democratisation ceases to be an utopian idea or blueprint and becomes a political strategy in the struggle to increase the influence of workers over the labour process, be it capitalist or socialist. This is what is distinctive about the workers' notion of workplace democracy. Their organic vision of democratisation takes as its point of departure the social relations of production and seeks to address the concerns of the workers on the shopfloor. The debate among the workers is far from over. For some inside and outside of the labour movement it is always tempting to take either what Cressey and MacInnes (1980) call the 'incorporationist' approach or the 'advance of labour approach'. (1980: 6) But to understand the real challenge of democratisation means we have to understand what Cressey and MacInnes term the 'material space for struggle at the point of production' which 'cuts both ways'. (1980: 20)

> If we escape from the notion of a working class which prior to the historical break is merely an 'aspect of capital' but exists politically as a universal force opposed to it, and open up the possibility for a 'practical and prefigurative socialist politics', then it must also be remembered that such a struggle roots itself initially in the workplace rather than in the class struggle as a whole. Just as such struggles are not artificial and 'incorporated', neither are they necessarily 'spontaneously' socialist. They may take either form, and the task before us is surely thus to develop yardsticks for differentiating the two and promoting the latter. (Cressey and MacInnes, 1980: 20)

**'I Will Only Leave the Union When I Die'**

Whether or not the union is equal to the 'task' identified by Cressey and MacInnes is a matter that is beyond the scope of this paper. It has been shown above that the union has not intervened in any serious way on the shop floor regarding worker participation. But this did not seem to have affected the support the union commands among the workers. In fact, according to the workers' vision, workplace democracy is not seen as an alternative to the union. On the contrary, the union is seen as an integral part of the democratic struggle on the shopfloor. Part of the explanation for this is the fact that their notion of the union is one which included themselves as members and shop stewards as their elected representatives who deal with their day-to-day concerns on the shopfloor. Union members noted that the introduction of the change processes by management had not made union membership irrelevant. All of them expressed a strong view that union was their strongest defence against management. They have seen many improvements brought by the union over the years. As one worker explained,

> We cannot do without the union. I will only leave the union when I die. Even when we have a new government we will still need a union. We will always need a union. It is our only hope. Before we were getting dismissed every day. Now the union has stopped that. (*Worker No. 16, Nampak Polyfoil*)

There are a number of factors that explain the level of support the union enjoys among its members and workers are influenced by some, or all these factors:

Firstly, the union has won real gains for the workers in terms of wages, physical working conditions, treatment by managers/foremen/supervisors, building solidarity among the workers and winning other conditions of work like shorter hours of work, shift allowances, etc. The union has also managed to reduce or stop some unfair practices like unfair dismissals, etc.

Secondly, the union is seen by the majority of workers to be operating democratically. The majority of workers (95 percent at Nampak and 84 percent at PG Bison) said that the union (shop stewards and union organisers) always call a meeting to get a mandate before negotiations with management. They further observed that all demands by management must first be approved by the workers and that there are always report-back meetings after each session of the negitiation process. Additionally, 97 percent of Nampak Polyfoil workers and 94 percent of PG Bison workers said the union always came back for a fresh mandate when there was a deadlock in negotiations.

In response to the question, "Do you feel that your shop stewards are always working according to the wishes of the workers when representing the workforce to management and the union?', workers in both factories gave the shop stewards and the union a strong vote of confidence (100% at PG Bison and 94 percent at Polyfoil answered 'yes' to this question). Even in cases where some workers said shop steward had acted without a mandate, they indicated that steps had been taken by workers against those shop stewards.[12]

Thirdly, all the workers had easy access to the union through their departmental shop stewards. Most workers in both factories (85 percent at PG Bison and 81 percent at Nampak Polyfoil) said they met and could consult their shop steward daily.

All the above constitute the model of democracy that unionised workers are used to, and they support it because it cares about the workers, it is accessible to all, it is fair and transparent, and the workers can exercise real control over it. One of the central arguments of this paper therefore is that organised workers' notion of industrial democracy or worker participation is founded on their experience of democratic practice in their

union. Their expectation is that industrial democracy should come close to or match that model of democracy just as they expect democracy in other spheres of society to do the same.[13]

Some may argue that this is a limited notion of industrial democracy, that it does not challenge the ownership of the means of production by one class, and that it is impossible to achieve democratic control in capitalist production. On the other hand, there may be those who argue that worker participation as introduced by management provides all the answers to workers' problems on the shop floor and therefore accept these schemes uncritically. Both arguments fail to understand the challenge posed by workers' struggles on the shop floor. What seems to be emerging from workers on the shop floor as they continue debating and engaging with management's schemes of worker participation is a phase of struggle by the workers whose emphasis is on what Goodrich (1920) calls "the demand to take a hand in the controlling. ...the desire for a share in the job of running things". (1920: 37) The challenge for PPWAWU and indeed, the entire trade union movement, as it enters a new era of democracy, is to begin to harness these and other experiences and workers' notions of democracy in the workplace and use them as a foundation for a new vision of workplace democratisation.

**Endnotes:**

1. Research for this paper was undertaken as part of an MA thesis which has since been completed. (Buhlungu, 1996)

2. PPWAWU came into being as a result of a merger of the Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PWAWU) and another smaller printing union in 1987. PWAWU had been formed in the early 1970s and was one of the founder unions of FOSATU in 1979. In 1985 it joined other independent unions to form the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU).

3. The strong perception that management's initiatives were aimed to undermine or had the effect of undermining the union, particularly elected worker leadership, also came out during interviews with shop stewards in both factories. This fear has been expressed by workers and shop stewards in other factories organised by other unions. von Holdt's (1993) research in a number of Natal factories, including Dunlop, Frame, Unilever, Alusaf and Coronation, found that "Shop stewards were suspicious or skeptical of these schemes, seeing them as dominated by management and designed to undermine the union". (von Holdt, K. (1993) "The Challenge of Participation", SALB, 17,3, p. 49). Similarly, Barret found 'cynicism' among Premier shop stewards because of a perception that management's participation programme was 'watering down' the militancy of the shop stewards and workers. (Barret, J. (1993) "Participation at Premier", SALB, 17,2, pp. 66 - 7).

4. Interview with Sipho Kubheka, former PPWAWU general secretary, 28 November 1994.

5. However, this was going to change later as the full implications of the change process became clearer to most workers. In 1994 a team of researchers from the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) and PPWAWU visited the factory to asses the impact of a group strategy called 'world class manufacturing'. Sixty workers had just been retrenched as a result of a restructuring exercise which involved rationalisation of production and the introduction of new technology. The team found a much greater degree of opposition the change process. For details see, SWOP/PPWAWU (1994) Restructuring at Nampak: A Strategy for Worker Involvement.

6. Group interview with shop stewards, PG Bison, July 1993.

7. Only Nampak Polyfoil has the position of team leader. 'Team leaders' are the lowest rung of the management hierarchy and are appointed by middle management to oversee the rest of the workforce. Despite the name, 'team leaders' precede the introduction of natural working teams by many years. They are very unpopular with most workers and the workforce now feel management is trying to impose them on the newly established teams.

8. Group interview with PG Bison shop stewards, Piet Retief, July 1993.

9. A rather surprising exception was one worker who agreed with the first statement in the table and went on to explain, "I do not believe that a company should be run democratically. It should be run by the person or people who have put down the capital." (Worker No. 24, PG Bison, Piet Retief)

10. The labour relations dispensation envisaged in the new Labour Relations Act creates opportunities which workers could exploit to make some gains on some of these issues. For example, Chapter V of this new law provides for forms of joint decision-making through structures called workplace forums. The forums also have powers to decide jointly with management on issues such as developing non-discrimination policies and affirmative action. Finally, the law also puts an obligation on management to disclose information to workers. See Labour Relations Act, No.66, 1995.

11. This discussion document, (Ntshangase, W. And Solomons, A. (1993)), was produced by the two PPWAWU officials after a two months research fellowship at the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at the University of the Witwatersrand. It argued for engagement with management participation strategies in a way which would not undermine the union and its collective bargaining structures. As a result it came out in favour of what it termed "adversarial participation", namely, participation through normal collective bargaining structures. Many workers and shop stewards felt the document did not give them concrete and practical suggestions for engaging with management.

12. The case of PG Bison illustrates this point. In one year a committee of shop stewards committee was perceived to be selling out to management. When their term of office expired they were not re-elected.

13. A recent study on workers expectations of parliamentary democracy also draws the conclusion that workers tend to transfer their understanding of union democracy to politics. They understand concepts like mandates and accountability in parliamentary politics in the same way that those concepts operate in union democracy (Ginsburg, D., Webster, E., et al (1995)).

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