

Adversarial participation:

a union response to participatory management



Management-initiated worker participation schemes pose a serious challenge to unions. Welcome Ntshangase and Apollis Solomons suggest how unions can respond creatively by making participation part of the collective bargaining process.*

In the face of stiff international competition South African companies will have to increase the quality of their products. But the development of the productive forces and the growth of the unions make it impossible for management to use coercive methods to increase productivity and ensure efficiency and quality of work. Instead, management must elicit the co-operation of workers by creating a working environment which encourages

workers to use their brain power and initiative.

How can unions respond? Direct participation in management-initiated structures is one option. We propose an alternative framework; unions need to respond by extending workers' control through the structures of collective bargaining.

Management approaches

There seem to be two management approaches

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to worker participation in the paper and printing sector. The first, at firms such as PG and Nampak, claims to be motivated by morale and socio-political changes. The second approach seems to stem from a need to increase productivity and transform the firm into a "world class company". Carlton and Sappi are the best examples of this approach.

The first approach stresses the need for common values shared by workers and management. These values are supposed to form the basis of daily activity within the company.

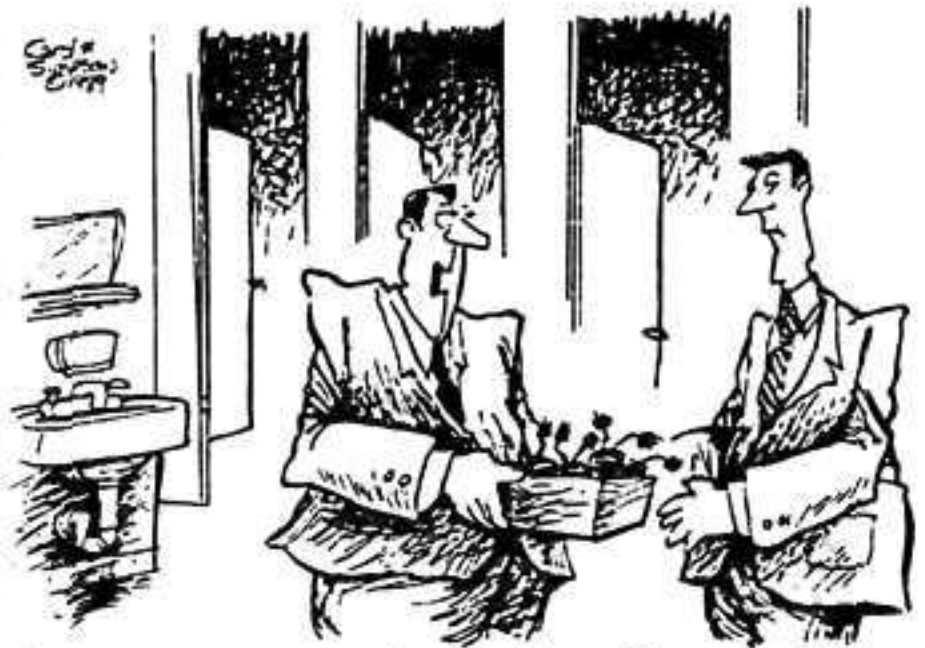
In 1987/88, PG introduced its TPQ (Total Productivity and Quality) philosophy. The company was restructured into eight strategic business units. At each site, natural work teams were formed. The "Strategic Business Unit" leadership consists of managers, shopstewards and non-unionised staff. This leadership is supposed to take all decisions affecting a SBU. However, there is as yet no evidence of this. All policy decisions are supposed to be discussed at the "National Forum", where all the SBU's and the unions are represented. But the reality is far less than the promise.

The second approach concentrates on quality improvement, production flow and team work. To improve productivity it aims to increase training and skills development to develop multi-skilled work teams.

In 1987, Carlton Paper adopted the "Total Quality Process" philosophy. This aimed to make Carlton a "world class company" by

becoming more efficient and productive. The company hopes to increase its turnover and profits four-fold in the next ten years. In this time, its employment will decrease by up to 30%. They believe this can be done without retrenchment.

Carlton claims to have reorganised production around natural work teams. They also claim to have cut out certain levels of management by transferring responsibilities onto the work teams. Productivity is to be improved through a training and skills development programme. The minimum educational level for new recruits is now matric. Employee development officers, who are drawn from the floor, identify education and training gaps and introduce new training opportunities.



"I want to open up better lines of communication with my employees. Plant these listening devices in all the washrooms."

Assessing management's approaches

Both approaches aim to increase productivity by developing workers' skills and giving workers and work teams limited responsibilities. Both stress improving quality, efficiency and competitiveness in a world market. Both models fail to define a clear role for trade unions on the shopfloor and have the potential to break the bond between individual workers and their collective organisation, and replace it with a company or enterprise union.

The main weaknesses of worker participation schemes are, firstly, that they arise in response to a crisis. As such, they are a management strategy to be used under certain conditions and disposed of if another strategy

proves to be more favourable to employers. Secondly, the schemes seek to institutionalise the new arrangements but tend to ignore the fact that change occurs gradually.



There is a common emphasis on productivity in these schemes. Unfortunately management fails to see productivity in a holistic way. Management conveniently ignores that there are many factors leading to lower productivity (including the productivity of capital and materials), and that in most industries a productivity increase will require the restructuring of the whole industry. Stressing the increase in labour productivity alone is management's attempt to make workers carry the entire burden of the problem.

Increases in productivity are not necessarily bad for workers. In fact, they may well benefit labour if management is serious enough to negotiate this with the union through collective bargaining. The emphasis should be on increasing overall productivity, and not just labour productivity. Through collective bargaining, the union can ensure that the increased social wealth created is directed into productive investment, expanding job creation and higher wages.

Both approaches stress the separation of participative structures from those of union-management collective bargaining structures. This is artificial and unnecessary; there should be a direct link between participative structures and collective bargaining.

If workers allow the two to be separated, the content of collective bargaining will be narrowed to wage bargaining and the union

will be separated from its natural base on the shopfloor. This would prevent workers from using their collective strength to fight for things like housing, training, or education.

Workers' gains on the shopfloor depend on their organisational strength. Separating workers from their organisation and narrowing the content of collective bargaining therefore undermines their power.

For the union to even consider co-decision-making in the form of participation, collective bargaining will have to be taken to its fullest stage: centralised bargaining.

Options facing the union

The union has three options in responding to participative schemes:

- stand back and let it happen
- obstruct
- become centrally involved



“Standing back” means the union would ignore any participative processes introduced at the workplace.

The advantage is that the union avoids the risk of losing its identity and finding itself co-managing the business with the bosses, while not sharing in the profits. While this seems the most comfortable option, it has serious weaknesses.

While the union stands back, its members and shopstewards participate unguided, without a framework or proper logistical back-up. The union is not visible in their day-to-day struggles and they soon see themselves as unconnected to the union beyond the workplace. This option has the potential to break the union into small company-based entities with no national perspective.



“Obstruction” requires the union to actively campaign to block management’s introduction of participative schemes. For this to be successful, it needs to involve all members at a particular company. The advantage of this option is that the union keeps its identity of fighting the bosses to protect its members’ interests. This also puts to rest the myth that the contradictions between labour and capital can be reconciled.

The disadvantage of the obstructionist approach is that, by the time the union learns about these schemes, union members and shopstewards are already involved in them and may resist any union attempts to obstruct the process.

Bosses present their schemes with the motivation that they want to democratise the workplace, give the workers a say, recognise workers’ contribution and give workers training, education, literacy, and housing. It is very difficult for the union to convince members not to accept this.



“Becoming involved” is an option with two possible paths; one driven by management and one driven by the union. In the first, the union participates in structures already designed by management. In the second, the union becomes part and parcel of the very process of defining participative structures.

The advantage of the second path is that, depending on the union’s collective strength, it can push the participative schemes far further than management initially intended. But it also requires the union to give members a framework and organisational backup.

The disadvantage of both paths is that it assumes that the union is participating because it has accepted the process as legitimate. It may end up identifying itself with the goals and objectives of the company.

The need for adversarial participation

Engaging with participation schemes by extending our collective bargaining structures would advance workers’ control over the labour process, the labour market and investment decisions.

For the union movement in South Africa there are important advantages in challenging participative schemes. Most workers have a basic political understanding of the conflictual relationship between labour and capital. They understand the importance of mandates and report-backs and are mature enough to detect any signs of co-option from their leaders, especially shopstewards. The option the union takes must build the union’s collective strength, its structures and its tradition of report-backs and mandates.

However, we are not undermining the need for individual workers to be treated like human beings and not like machines. It is therefore important, when selecting an option, to consider both our collective strength and the individual’s ability to think and acquire skills in the work environment.

Our proposal is that the unions adopt a position of adversarial participation. This suggestion emerges from a principled position: that there exists an irreconcilable contradiction between the interests of labour and capital. The participative schemes raise the key question of the relationship between individual workers and their collective organisation.

Management believes that workers’ individual interests would be best served by the company’s success. It puts workers and managers on the same side in efforts to

improve productivity and growth; unions are extraneous to their plans.

In our view, however, the only way for workers to protect their interests over the long term is through their own independent, collective organisation. We see no contradiction between our collective strength through our union structures and the individual worker's satisfaction or ability to participate in making decisions affecting his/her work and life. This is the essence of trade unionism.

But recognition of the conflict between labour and capital does not mean that co-operation is impossible. However, this should not be at the expense of the union as an institution, or the class interests of its members.

Participating on our own terms

We argue that the union should engage the companies and participate in these processes of change, but on our own terms through collective bargaining, rather than on management's terms. In this way we can achieve the goals of expanding worker power and the role of the union. This is what we mean by adversarial participation: participation, yes, but in a way which does not ignore the irreconcilable differences between labour and capital. This can only be accomplished by establishing the role of organised labour in the whole process, because only through their collective strength can workers direct such schemes. We argue for workers' participation in all decisions made in a company. This requires the full development of the collective bargaining system, including centralised bargaining.

Furthermore, the content of bargaining should be broadened to include issues over and above wages. At the corporate level, this includes medium and long-term visions, development and training, investment, technology, strategy formulation and organisational structuring. On the shopfloor, bargaining will cover all operational issues which in the past were the prerogative of first-line management in particular and operations management in general.

Therefore, our engagement with these

schemes moves from the premise which recognises that there are at least two parties involved in the production process: workers and management.

The independence and divisions between these parties should not be played down; rather, a recognition of this should serve as the basis for regulating conflicts. If these differences are ignored or denied, they will surely erupt in an uncontrolled and destructive way. This recognition is the essence of adversarialism.

Involving union structures

It is therefore suggested that workers be involved in direct joint decision-making on the shopfloor through their union structures. This means that worker representatives (rather than workers) as individuals should lead any permanent participative structures. Individual workers should engage in these structures, but only as part of a collective force. This is the only way to ensure the process is worker-led and not individual-led. This extends the union's existing practice by going beyond the traditional bargaining issues to include all decisions affecting workers.

In making these suggestions, we are informed by the experiences of participative initiatives which have created natural or permanent work teams, but which fail to define the role of the union structures within those teams. This has the potential to destroy workers' ability to see themselves as part of organised labour and undermine workers' chances of safeguarding their long-term interests.

We are suggesting the above as a framework for engaging management's participative schemes. However, it will not be possible for us in this paper to be prescriptive about the form of structures at the shopfloor, factory, or corporate levels. This will be determined by the conditions at a particular company.

If we are to participate effectively, we will have to extend our collective bargaining structures and substantially improve our internal union capacity. ☆