

# New relations on the shopfloor?

by *KARL VON HOLDT*

**S**hould shopstewards become involved in disciplining workers? Does working in teams provide new opportunities, or does it divide workers? Can shopstewards engage with management's 'worker participation' projects, or will they be accused by their members of selling out? These were some of the key questions debated at a week-long training course held in the NUMSA Wits-West region in June.

The workshop, led by NUMSA education officer Roger Etkind, aimed to equip shopstewards to respond to management initiatives in 'worker participation' and 'lean production', such as green areas, TQM, JIT, multi-tasking and team-work. The workshops also aimed to deepen shopstewards' understanding of NUMSA's training and grading strategy. Similar workshops are to be held in all NUMSA regions.

## **"Management proposes, we reject"**

At the heart of the workshop was the question whether – and how – shopstewards can move from a strategy of simply resisting management proposals to proactive unionism. A number of shopstewards reported how they had prevented the implementation of green areas, or avoided productivity deals. In mock negotiations, shopstewards demonstrated a sharp ability to resist management initiatives with delaying tactics, or by simply denying the existence of a problem outlined by management (for example, low productivity, poor quality, high absenteeism).

The problem is how to go beyond the tactics of resistance. Shopstewards from Envirotech, for example, explained that they had rejected managements' proposals for

teamwork, because it was based on multi-tasking, ie it loaded workers with extra tasks without upgrading their skills or wages. "But", they said, "we are unable to make proposals of our own. Management proposes, we reject. They propose, we reject. We need help from our local office."

Etkind comments that local organisers often avoid dealing with these problems, because they are complex and time-consuming.

## **Discipline**

The workshop began to address the problem by providing a forum for shopstewards to discuss and compare different responses. Shopstewards from Toyota Marketing, for example, explained that they have a role in guiding or reprimanding workers if they break company regulations. Management accepts this role. A disciplinary hearing is only called if workers are unable to solve the problem.

Other shopstewards attacked this, arguing that the Toyota shopstewards were taking on management's responsibilities, and would forget their responsibility to their members. Toyota shopstewards rejected this: "We are saving workers from management discipline – you know discipline means dismissal." Other workers supported them, commenting that shopstewards often lose disciplinary cases, and that in the end even local organisers would say the worker was wrong and could not be defended.

## **Teamwork**

There was also extensive discussion about teamwork. Many expressed the concern that teamwork could promote competition between groups of workers. One team might make proposals that could adversely affect

workers outside the team.

Organisers suggested this problem could be overcome by insisting that bonuses for improved productivity be paid out to the entire workforce instead of one team only. Suggestions for improving production should be co-

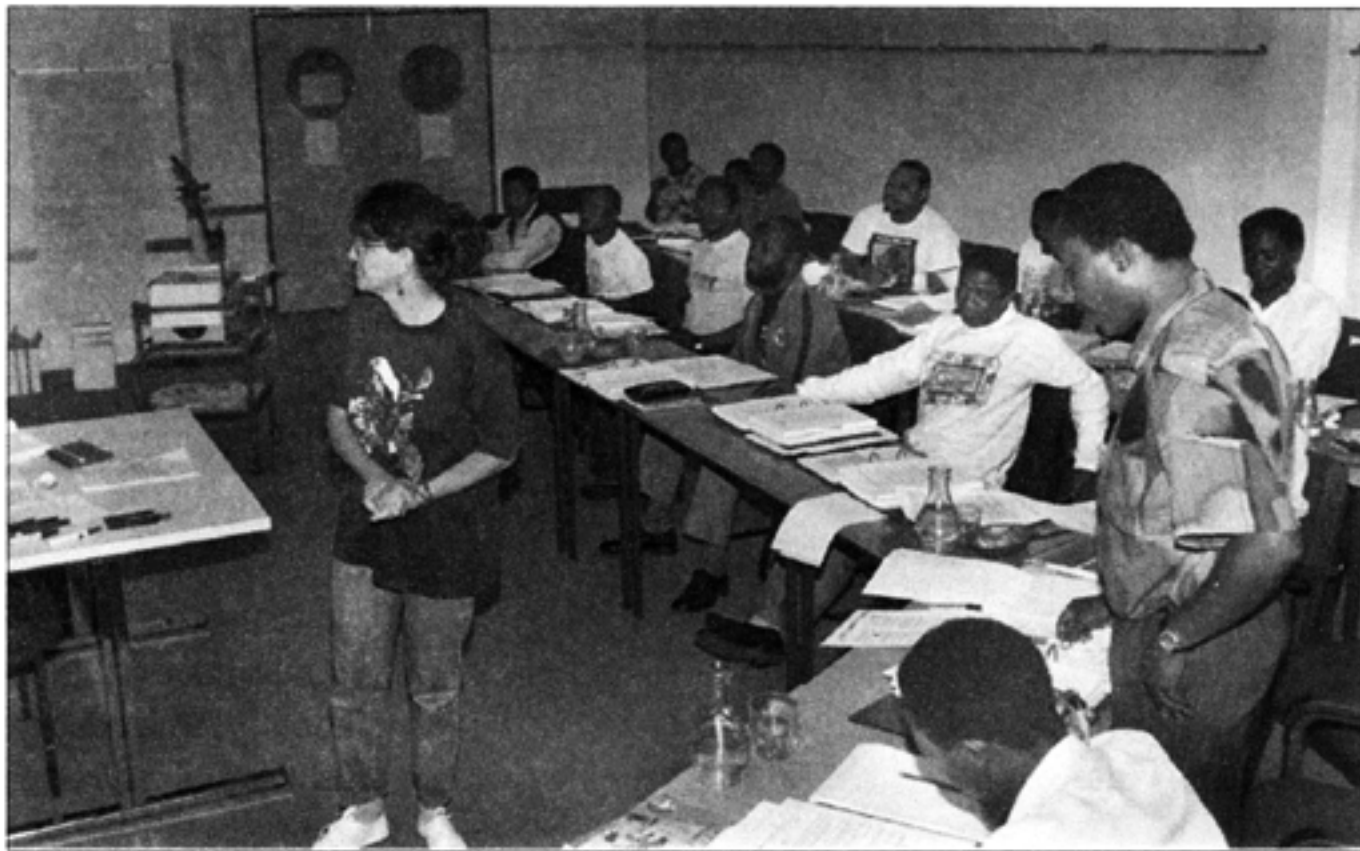
ordinated through the shopsteward committee, to avoid competition and division. One worker objected: "But if one department makes good suggestions, why should others share the money?"

Shopstewards also debated whether teamwork meant removing the supervisor; whether the team leader should do the work of the supervisor; and whether the team leader should be paid extra. Etkind presented the union model of a "multi-skilled" team working, for example, on an assembly-line. Each member would have the general skills necessary for assembly work, and each worker would also have specialist skills in specific areas, such as quality control, tool setting or maintenance. This would provide opportunity for further training and a career-path.

### **Worker participation – does it have a future?**

'Worker participation' holds many dangers for workers – it may lead to division, job loss and increased work pressure. Shopstewards are sharply aware of this, and of the dangers of losing the confidence of members if they associate too much with management.

But if shopstewards rely only on the old tactics of resistance they may lose the



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opportunity to influence change on the shopfloor. They may also find that their employer becomes less and less competitive, and members' jobs are threatened.

A different way of responding to this is proactive unionism, or strategic unionism, where the union makes proposals which may address some of managements' concerns, while also advancing members' interests. But shopstewards and organisers cannot make proposals if they are not equipped with the necessary information and confidence. The NUMSA workshops are a crucial part of doing this.

There is an enormous amount of distrust on the shopfloor. Shopstewards will not take management's concerns seriously unless they are confident they are equipped to independently assess production problems, as well as management proposals, and to defend their members' interests while engaging with such issues.

This is what makes the demands for paid time-off for shopsteward training, for full-time or part-time shopstewards, and for general meetings in working time (so shopstewards can keep close contact with members) so crucial to the future of industry. Employers and government would do well to heed union demands for these rights. *Fr*