

# DEMOCRACY



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## **HISTORY WORKSHOP**

**DEMOCRATISING THE WORKPLACE: WORKER PERSPECTIVES ON  
INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY**

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## DEMOCRATISING THE WORKPLACE: WORKER PERSPECTIVES ON INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

### Abstract

The central theme of the transition under way in South Africa is democratisation of all spheres of life. One such sphere is the workplace where millions of workers spend most of their adult lives working for a living. For many years workers and their trade unions have been in the forefront of struggles for better wages and working conditions at the workplace. In many cases these struggles have also been about control at the workplace, or what Goodrich has termed "the demand not to be controlled disagreeably". This paper draws on interviews with workers and shop stewards at two factories in the Transvaal and seeks to establish the extent to which their notion of industrial democracy and worker participation constitutes what Goodrich has called "the demand to take a hand in controlling". What emerges is not a homogenous understanding of workplace democracy, but a range of views and opinions. The paper also analyses a number of powerful factors which influence or shape the views of workers on the subject of industrial democracy. The conclusion of this discussion is that democracy is part of the consciousness of unionised workers as it is the guiding principle in all union structures. It is therefore inevitable that the demand for democracy at the workplace will become part of organised workers' notion of justice and fairness on the shop floor.

It is now 20 years since the independent trade unions first emerged following the wave of strikes that erupted in 1973, first in Durban, then in other parts of the country. Unlike any other phase of unionisation in the history of black unions in South Africa the phase of unionisation that began in the early 1970s has deepened and the unions have continued to show resilience and have become the pillars of one of Africa's strongest labour movements. In his study of the development of African trade union in South Africa, Webster has identified three phases in the growth of a trade union, namely recruitment, winning recognition from management and negotiating and maintaining an agreement that guarantees certain rights to workers in the factories.<sup>1</sup> The problem, according to Webster has been the inability of unions to move from phase one to phase three mainly due to the failure to win management recognition and the hostility of the

state. Webster summarises this problem in the following terms:

**"What seems to have happened in South Africa is that at each stage in the emergence of embryonic African trade unions, the process of maturation has been ruptured at a crucial point, and the unions have been unable to convert from a temporary organisation into a permanent organisation."** <sup>2</sup>

However, the independent unions which emerged in the 1970s have not only been able to move from phase one to phase three, they have also, in the process, managed to consolidate organisation and win for themselves a powerful and permanent position in the workplaces and, indeed, in the economy as a whole. Webster correctly pinpoints the reason for this success by black trade unions:

**"For a moment in 1976 - 77 it looked as though the pattern of non-transition to permanent organisation would repeat itself; but the consolidation of monopoly capitalism had given black semi-skilled workers a strategic location in the labour process, and effective shop floor tactics were able to exploit this lever in spite of the obstacles to workplace organisation enumerated in this chapter."** <sup>3</sup>

This leads Webster to conclude that shop floor struggles by metal workers in the period 1973 - 76 shifted the balance of power and made unionism a 'permanent feature of industry'. <sup>4</sup> Since the mid-1980s the struggles of the independent unions have been about consolidating and deepening their 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 related to control of the workplaces, or what Goodrich has termed 'interfering with the employer's business'.<sup>5</sup> The formation of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) in 1985 was one of the most important stages in the process of deepening organisation as the new federation brought together most of the independent unions thus becoming the strongest component of the labour movement in the country. At its inaugural congress in December 1985 COSATU took a resolution on the national minimum wage. Part of the resolution was to,

**"Fight to open all the books of every organised company so that workers can see exactly how the wealth they have produced is being wasted and misused by the**

employers' profit system, and on that basis can demand their full share of the wealth they have produced. Should the wealth not be there, then it will only prove the inefficiency of employer management and strengthen the case for worker control and management of production." <sup>6</sup>

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 control." <sup>7</sup>

The militancy of workers on the shop floor has served to reinforce calls for greater control on the shop floor. In recent years these calls have taken a concrete form with demands to management to stop unilateral restructuring which almost always leads to retrenchments. But it is still difficult to get a concrete overall union strategy on worker control or industrial democracy. <sup>8</sup> What this paper seeks to do is to piece together material gathered from interviews with workers organised by a COSATU affiliate in two companies that have been experimenting with worker participation over the last few years. The significance of the perspectives of the workers is twofold:

- Firstly, they signify the beginning of a new phase of struggle for the union movement, that of trying to influence and change power relations on the shop floor by focusing on concrete issues and problems over and above wages and conditions of employment.
- Secondly, they show 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.

### **a) The Factory Studies**

This paper is based on interviews with workers and shop stewards in two factories of companies which have started experimenting with ideas of worker participation or participative management.

Nampak Polyfoil is part of the South Africa's leading printing and packaging company, Nampak, and is based at Nancefield industrial area, Johannesburg. It manufactures polyethylene-based retail check-out bags and other related plastic packaging products and, at the time of the study, had over 300 employees. The majority of these workers were members of the Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PPWAWU).

At the end of 1991 Nampak Polyfoil management started what became known as the 'change process' which had worker participation in decision-making as one of its key elements. The initial stage of the change process involved attempts to draw up and ratify a set of common values by management and the workforce represented by the union. A series of consultations to elicit views of the entire workforce were held and tremendous progress was made as some of the fears from both sides were dispelled and differences began to narrow. However, the values were never ratified as discussions soon got bogged down in trying to arrive at a common interpretation of participation. Some of the workers and shop stewards also felt that their involvement in the change process was having the effect of weakening their union. So the change process was suspended in 1992.

Nampak Polyfoil management has since come up with a new strategy which they claim is aimed to take the factory to world-class manufacturing standards. Part of this strategy is to set up 'natural working teams', work teams which bring people in related stages of the production process together. Management's notion of worker participation is that workers should participate at the level of their jobs through the teams.<sup>9</sup>

The study was done at a time when shop stewards and workers were busy discussing a possible response to this new strategy by management. What came out of the interviews was both a critique of management's strategy as well as a discussion of the form of worker participation they wished to see.

PG Bison (Piet Retief) is a manufacturing business unit of PG Bison, one of South Africa's leading chip board and related wood products manufacturers. In contrast to Nampak Polyfoil which is based in a city industrial area and whose workers are largely urbanised, PG Bison (Piet Retief) is based in a rural area and most of its workers have their roots in the rural areas of northern Natal and the Eastern Transvaal. At the time the study was done the factory had more than 400 employees, the majority of who were organised under the PPWAWU.

In the late 1980s PG Bison nationally introduced a 'continuous improvement' process, called Total Productivity and Quality (TPQ), one of whose elements was worker participation in decision-making. The structures set up to facilitate such participation included work groups or teams called 'in-a-groups' as well as a national forum comprising managers and worker representatives (shop stewards) from all PG Bison factories and distribution centres in the country. A set of values, which included a commitment by management to promote worker participation, were also agreed.<sup>10</sup> While some shop stewards and workers were happy with TPQ, a number of others, including union officials and the national executive of the union were very sceptical of the process. At some stage the process was suspended at the insistence of the national leadership of the union pending a proper negotiation of how the process was to be implemented. Since then the process has had its ups and downs and, at the time the study was done at Piet Retief there were very few signs left to show that TPQ had been implemented in the factory.

The PG Bison interviews also involved a critique of TPQ and how it was implemented at the factory and a discussion of how workers saw worker participation and industrial democracy.

The study was conducted through a questionnaire which was administered to a 10

percent sample of workers in each factory. Data gathered in this way has since been analyzed and has been used in preparing this paper. In addition six shop stewards and some management representatives were interviewed in each factory using a structured interview schedule.

### **b) Constructing a Workers' Theory of Industrial Democracy**

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, in his discussion of coordination and control in different forms of social production, locates the question of control and participation in decision-making in capitalist production:

"... there 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 analyzing capitalist production, then, it is more appropriate to speak of control than coordination, although of course, control is a means of coordination." <sup>11</sup>

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 literature on this subject that worker participation or industrial democracy or workers' control of industry is a matter that goes beyond what Clegg calls 'pressure group industrial democracy' or 'democracy through collective bargaining'. <sup>12</sup> In general, all debates about 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.

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.<sup>13</sup> The space available does not permit a more in-depth discussion of the various schools of thought and contributions by other theorists on this subject. Suffice it to say that indications are that in practice issues are not as clear-cut as the above characterisation seems to suggest. In the past debates in COSATU, as the above quote from their 1985 resolution will show, 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.

The approach adopted in this paper is one which attempts to piece together workers' perspectives on the subject of industrial democracy or worker participation in factories where management has introduced schemes of worker participation. Instead of giving a 'correct' definition of worker participation or industrial democracy, this paper has attempted to let the workers themselves define the issues in discussions and interviews.

### c) Workers' hopes and suspicions

While the collapse of East European socialism has dampened the enthusiasm of some in the leadership of the labour movement for the idea, workers on the shop floor continue to pose questions around the issue of control in an attempt to push back the frontier of control. The democratisation of 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?"<sup>14</sup>

An interesting feature of the factories is that both, like most South African factories, have a history of an autocratic management style and racism. Most of the workers



interviewed as part of the samples in both factories recalled a history a racism, unfair dismissals, harassment and poor wages and working conditions. All the workers in both factories 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."<sup>15</sup>

In both factories management introduced their experiments in worker participation in a context where the union had power and enjoyed a great deal of legitimacy and credibility among the workers. Zimi Masuku, the chairperson of the Nampak Polyfoil shop stewards committee was not exaggerating when he said,

"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."<sup>16</sup>

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."<sup>17</sup>

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 give an explanation which has a lot of relevance to why management in South Africa are introducing worker participation. The research in six British factory conducted from the late 1970s to the mid 1980s led them to conclude that,

"When looking at the case studies it is the instability, change and turbulence that is evident. The long periods of contact with and observation of the cases show

how such turbulence promotes challenges to management's normal practices causing them to recast their approach and specific policies. In each case these pressures and constraints differ but the key organisational problem of gaining a working consensus remains for all of them. At certain points the inherent instability that characterises 'routine' management can become a 'crisis' inasmuch as management ceases to manage through consensus and legitimate authority and is instead forced to act through different managerial practices." <sup>18</sup>

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, there is no doubt that South African industry has been experiencing instability, change and turbulence for a number of years now. <sup>19</sup> 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, have as their primary motive the 'gaining of a working consensus' on the shop floor.

Seven possible reasons why management had introduced worker participation were included in the questionnaire and in each case the workers were given the option to 'agree', 'disagree' or indicate if they were 'not sure'. The table below looks at responses to five of 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. <sup>20</sup>

**Table 1:**

(NB: All figures provided are percentages)

**Management is sincere about involving workers in decision-making**

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Not sure</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	39	6	55
PG Bison	27	0	71

**They want to divide and weaken the union**

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Not sure</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	48	16	35
PG Bison	71	7	19

**They just want workers to increase productivity**

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Not sure</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	90	3	6
PG Bison	93	2	2

**They want workers to be loyal to the company**

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Not sure</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	93	0	7
PG Bison	90	2	5

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

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Not sure</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	71	12	16
PG Bison	88	2	7

The suspicions of the workers stem from their experience of what they regard as management's lack of good faith and the fact that they are not ready to relinquish any of the power they have had all these years. As one Nampak Polyfoil shop steward put it,

"... there 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."<sup>21</sup>

**d) Workers' criticism of worker participation as introduced by management**

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 of many workers because management's rhetoric when introducing the process promised to bring about many changes on the shop floor and in the way the company is run. At PG Bison they 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 greater say for workers around their specific jobs. But when the process failed to produce results workers became critical and in both cases this led them to withdraw their support. 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."** <sup>22</sup>

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 changed circumstances 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."** <sup>23</sup>

While most workers and shop stewards complained that most of the issues agreed in discussions 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 that seemed to be continuing. Qoqozulu Mngomezulu, a shop steward at PG Bison believes that the in-a-groups failed because management used the wrong approach in implementing them:

"... they 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." <sup>24</sup>

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. 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." <sup>25</sup>

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." <sup>26</sup>

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.

At Nampak Polyfoil the only aspects of the change process that have been implemented are a production bonus and the natural working teams. It is difficult to assess any of them at this stage 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<sup>27</sup> were phased out and their powers delegated to the teams. The teams would then elect their co-ordinators from within their ranks and 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. Then management went ahead and introduced the natural 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."<sup>28</sup>

e) 'We need a democratic management team'

One of the interesting findings of the research is that workers hold very pragmatic 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.<sup>29</sup>

In the questionnaire workers were given three statements (see table below) and were asked to indicate if they 'agree', 'not sure' or 'disagree' with each statement.

**Table 2:**

(NB: All figures are percentages)

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

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	6	94
PG Bison	2	98

**Workers have contributed to building of the company and should therefore run the company jointly with management**

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	100	0
PG Bison	100	0

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

	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Polyfoil	26	74
PG Bison	7	93

The responses show that most workers reject the notion that 'management knows all and should therefore take all decisions'.<sup>30</sup> 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." <sup>31</sup>**

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 results 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.

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. PG Bison shop steward, Simon Dlamini 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." <sup>32</sup>**

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 in both factories were very unhappy with the irrationalities of the present system of decision-making on the shop floor and resented the powers that supervisors and team leaders wield. 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.<sup>33</sup> 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."<sup>34</sup>

Thus the demand for more participation by workers around their jobs, whether through teams or as individuals, is accompanied by another demand, 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.

While getting rid of team leaders, supervisors and foreman is seen as a solution by some workers, there are those who argue 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 structures (management structures)."<sup>35</sup>

Thus the demand to participate on the shop floor is linked to one for participation at higher levels of decision-making. A Nampak Polyfoil shop steward summarized the

rationale for workers wanting to participate in 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 managers, 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 the 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." <sup>36</sup>

This desire to participate derives from worker's experience of democracy in a trade union, a form of 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, where workers believe they cannot trust management to take the right and just decisions to accommodate all interests within the company. As table 2 above indicates, 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 the questionnaire workers were asked to list three things that would have to be done to make their factory democratic. In both factories joint decision-making came top of the list 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.

An interesting observation made in both factories is that the national union played no role in assisting the workers and the shop stewards to develop a response to the new strategies of management. <sup>37</sup> A Nampak Polyfoil shop steward complained that most of their full-time union officials do not have enough skills to help workers respond to the

change process,

"... sometimes 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." <sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding this and other weaknesses facing the union workers on the shop floor are in the process of developing a framework which will become the foundation of their notion of industrial democracy. The key elements of this emerging framework are:

- Workers' involvement in decision-making at all levels (in some instances this may involve the flattening management hierarchies, particularly on the shop floor. Involving workers in decision-making also involves developing, jointly with the workers, better systems of consultation and communication).
- Full disclosure of all information.
- Better opportunities for all workers. This includes education, training, promotions.
- Fair rewards and incentive schemes (this includes wages, bonuses).
- Fair and equal treatment for all (no racial discrimination, an effort to improve living standards of workers as well as their physical working conditions, fair grading systems, no favouritism, no victimisation).

Central to the workers' notion of industrial democracy is joint decision-making (no decisions imposed), justice and fairness and transparency. This is the test that any management strategy of worker participation would have to pass before management can be able to re-establish a 'working consensus' at the two factories.

There are a number of strengths to the workers' notion of industrial democracy, the main one being the fact that its point of departure are the realities of the shop floor, including the demands and grievances of the workers. The debate among the workers is far from over. For some in the labour movement and those who observe the movement from outside it is always tempting to take either what Cressey and MacInnes call the 'incorporationist' approach or the 'advance of labour approach'. <sup>39</sup> But to understand the real challenge of worker participation means we have to understand what Cressey

and MacInnes term the 'material space for struggle at the point of production' which 'cuts both ways'.<sup>40</sup>

"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 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."<sup>41</sup>

### f) '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 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. Union members were asked the question, 'Do you feel there is still a need for the union after management introduced participatory management?' and had to answer 'yes' or 'no'. In both factories 100 percent of the workers answered 'yes'! Workers in both factories 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."<sup>42</sup>

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:

- 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 hour, shift allowances and struggle holidays. The union has also managed to reduce or stop some unfair occurrences like unfair dismissals, etc.

- The union is seen by the majority of workers to be operating democratically. Workers were asked a set of questions on how the union handles negotiations with management and were given the options 'always', 'sometimes', 'seldom', 'never' and 'don't know' on each. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3:** How does the union (shop stewards' and organisers) handle negotiations with management:

(NB: All figures are percentages)

**a) They call workers and get a mandate before negotiations**

	<u>Always</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Don't know</u>
Polyfoil	95	2	2	-	-
PG Bison	84	10	-	-	6%

**b) All demands to management must first be approved by the workers**

	<u>Always</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>
Polyfoil	95	2	2	-	-
PG Bison	87	13	-	-	-

**c) They give workers a report-back after negotiations**

	<u>Always</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Don't know</u>
Polyfoil	100	-	-	-	-
PG Bison	97	3	-	-	-

**d) When there is no agreement they call workers to get a new mandate**

	<u>Always</u>	<u>Sometimes</u>	<u>Seldom</u>	<u>Never</u>	<u>Don't know</u>
Polyfoil	97	3	-	-	-
PG Bison	94	-	-	3	3

Also, workers were asked 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?" In both cases the response showed a strong vote of confidence in the union (100 percent 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. <sup>43</sup>

- 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 Polyfoil) said they met and could consult their shop steward daily.

All the above constitute the model of democracy that the workers are used to, and they support it because 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. <sup>44</sup>

Some may want to argue that this is a limited notion of industrial democracy, that it does not challenge to 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 may want to 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 to debate management's schemes of worker participation is a phase of struggle whose emphasis is what Goodrich calls "the demand to take a hand in the controlling. ...the desire for a share in the job of running things".<sup>45</sup> The challenge to our society, as it enters a new era of democratisation, is to begin to harness these and other experiences of democracy in civil society and use them as a foundation to build the future.

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### Endnotes

1. Webster, E. (1985) *Cast in a Racial Mould: Labour Process and Trade Unionism in the Foundries*, Johannesburg: Ravan, p. 127
2. Ibid., p. 128
3. Ibid., p. 131.
4. Ibid., p. 150.
5. Goodrich, C.L. (1920) *The Frontier of Control: A Study in British Workshop Politics*, London: G. Bell & Sons, see especially pages 54 - 56 for a discussion of workers' control.
6. COSATU Resolution on Minimum wage, December 1985.
7. Elijah Barayi in Report from the Second National Congress of COSATU, 1987.
8. The general problem facing the unions is lack of the capacity to be pro-active on the issue. The result is, as one unionist noted, that "proposals always come from management, and the union has to respond." (Mandla Gxanyana, general secretary of Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU) quoted in Barrret, J. (1993) "Participation at Premier: Worker Empowerment or Co-option?", SALB, 17,2.
9. Vusi Khumalo, the Continuous Improvement Manager, explained that teams are the structures "where people have the opportunity of debating issues, discussing issues and participating in deciding about issues that affect them directly in their work stations." The General Manager, Loutjie de Jongh added that only management had the ability and skills to take higher decisions, like buying new machinery: "... I don't think they (workers) have the ability to make that decision. And I don't know what the good is of asking the people (workers) anyway." (Both interviewed at Nampak Polyfoil, October/November 1993).
10. The values, principles and structures of TPQ are set out in a booklet entitled, "PG Bison Values and Statement of Objectives"
11. Edwards, R. (1979) *Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Basic Books, p. 17.
12. Clegg, H.A. (1960) *A New Approach to Industrial Democracy*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, p. 131. See also Goodrich, C.L. (1920) *The Frontier of Control*, London: G. Bell and Sons,

and Maller, J. (1992) Conflict and Co-operation, Johannesburg: Ravan.

13. Clegg, op cit, pp. 131 - 132.
14. Irene Lazarus, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
15. Worker No. 26, Nampak Polyfoil.
16. Zimi Masuku, shop stewards chairperson, Nampak Polyfoil.
17. Worker No. 25, PG Bison, Piet Retief.
18. Cressey, P. Eldridge, J. and MacInnes J. (1985) "Just Managing": Authority and Democracy in Industry, Milton Keynes: OUP, p. 143
19. see also von Holdt, K. (1993) "The Challenge of Participation", SALB, 17, 3, page 52.
20. 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. (see von Holdt, K. (1993), op cit and Barret, J. (1993) op cit)
21. Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
22. Worker No. 13, PG Bison.
23. Worker No. 26, Nampak Polyfoil.
24. Qoqozulu Mngomezulu, shop steward, PG Bison.
25. Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PG Bison.
26. Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PG Bison.
27. Only Nampak Polyfoil has the position of team leader. 'Team leaders' are at 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.
28. Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
29. Clegg, H.A., op cit, p. 132.
30. 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)

31. Worker No. 35, PG Bison.
32. Simon Dlamini, shop steward, PG Bison.
33. "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)

At PG Bison a similar sentiment was expressed in a group discussion with shop stewards: "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 discussion with shop stewards, PG Bison, August 1993)

34. Beljium Makhabane, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
35. Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
36. Sydwell Qomoyi, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
37. The only union intervention some shop stewards could recall was a discussion paper written by Ntshangase and Solomons which said the union had three options: stand back and let it happen, obstruct the process or that the union should become centrally involved. 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 dealing with the nitty gritty of the initiatives by management
38. Themba Tiya, shop steward, Nampak Polyfoil.
39. Creese, P and MacInnes, J. (1980) "Voting for Ford: Industrial Democracy and the Control of Labour", Capital & Class, 11, 1980, p. 6.
40. Ibid. p. 20.
41. Ibid. p. 20.
42. Worker No. 16, Nampak Polyfoil.
43. For example, at PG Bison a former chairperson of the shop stewards committee who was considered to have 'sold out' by embracing TPQ even when it was seen to be detrimental to workers was removed from the committee and eventually expelled from the union. Both these steps were taken by the

workers themselves without the involvement of the union branch in the area.

44. A recent study on workers expectations of parliamentary democracy done by Prof Webster from the Sociology of Work Unit (SWOP) at Wits and a number of other academics also draws the conclusion that workers tend to transfer their understanding of union democracy to politics. They understand concepts like mandates and accountability in in parliamentary politics in the same way that those concepts operate in union democracy.
45. Goodrich, C.L., op cit, p. 37.