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TRADE UNIONS AND EMPOWERMENT:
TWO CASES FROM INDIA**

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HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, TRADE UNIONS AND EMPOWERMENT : TWO CASES FROM INDIA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the introduction of schemes aimed at employee empowerment within a context of strong industrial relations in India. The pressure put on profit margins by a competitive business environment is forcing an increasing number of Indian enterprises to view employee empowerment as a serious strategic option. Getting workers to take responsibility for shop-floor decisions over quality, safety, productivity and material use appears, at first sight, an alluring prospect. It would seem that men and women at the bottom of the pyramid cannot but be warmly appreciative of powersharing arrangements from which they have much to gain, but there are forces at work which can actively obstruct or quietly subvert attempts at redistributing power. In this paper the focus is on some of the motives a trade union might have to do so.

Introduction

The concept of empowerment has a positive connotation in the social sciences. Empowerment, writes Jyll Bystydzienski, refers to '...a process by which oppressed persons gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in the development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly' (1992:3). Similarly, in the field of women's studies, it is thought to imply ways of 'empowering women and/or women's groups to make their own choices, to speak out on their own behalf and to control their own lives' (Wieringa 1994:831-32). Empowerment is, however, a relatively new concept in labour studies, although it would have been expected to enjoy pride of place in research on workers' participation and self-management, an academic growth industry in the seventies and early eighties. The index of the *Concise Encyclopaedia of Participation and Co-Management* (Szell, 1992) --running to over a 1,000 pages-- does not mention the word once, despite over 200 references to the word 'power'. More recently, empowerment has come to imply a management stratagem to introduce new forms of work organisation that offer little to workers or their unions. Although reminiscent of earlier approaches to labour relations, as for example the human relations school or workers' participation, empowerment in the context of 'lean production' has been associated

with QCCs, suggestion schemes and kaizen. Shopfloor forms of participation aimed at creating worker loyalty and commitment (see e.g. Ridgeway & Wallace 1994; Thompson 1994), manufacturing worker consent, and bypassing the union (see e.g. Martinez Lucio & Weston 1992a; Kumar 1995) have all been construed as management experiments in 'empowerment'. With empowerment becoming a euphemism for work intensification (Hyman & Mason 1995:191), workers and their unions have turned sceptical about the process. As a union official in a Japanese car transplant in Canada observed (in CAW-Canada 1993:39): 'This empowerment, when it's cost saving or quality problems, OK, but when it's human problems, a comfort issue, whatever, there's no empowerment. It's one-sided. That's the bottom line.'

Team work, direct participation, kaizen and a host of joint worker-management councils have similarly found little favour with organised labour. The managerial buzzword of multi-skilling is frequently a camouflage for 'multi-tasking', and team work a ruse to get workers to stand in for absent colleagues. As Parker and Slaughter (1988) aptly label it, this is management by stress. On the other hand, group work at shopfloor level, or plant based consultative fora have been seen as deliberate attempts to crush collective bargaining, if not the unions themselves. Quality Control Circles have been analyzed as such in the context of the USA (Grenier 1988)¹. And in the UK, the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union remarked (in Martinez Lucio & Weston 1992b:85): '...a new era of crafty Rambo managers has come into existence which seek to ignore or deliberately disrupt union organisation and collective bargaining procedures, by bringing in their own schemes based on fake committees and centred on the individual worker, not the organised worker, with the aim of undermining established working practices and bargaining methods.'

All these initiatives within the realm of new managerial strategies have been grouped together under the heading of 'Human Resource Management' (HRM). Confusion reigns about the exact meaning of the term: it is used differently over time and place. Distinctions have been made between 'soft' and 'hard' variants, and between inclusionary and exclusionary approaches. In the USA connotations differ from those in the UK which, in turn, are different from continental Europe. As Storey (1995:5) puts it, HRM is a (hopeless) '...amalgam of description, prescription and logical deduction.'

The theme which this paper seeks to address is one that combines 'empowerment', HRM and trade union responses in the context of new developments brought about by economic liberalisation policies in India. The paper will, in particular, discuss the hostile reaction of powerful trade unions to the introduction of schemes which, quite unlike many HRM

¹ In the UK a similar finding was reported: "...quality circles appear to be part of a wider strategy for winning the hearts and minds in highly unionised workplaces" (in Beaumont 1995:94).

experiments that fell foul of workers, seem to have high potential for improving their position with regard to decisions that affect them directly. The specifics of the two situations described later in this paper lead us to ask why workers and their unions alike have allowed management to appropriate the concept of 'empowerment' and imbue it with a meaning that contradicts its very essence? Is it possible for unions to 're-appropriate' the concept and return to 'empowerment' its original meaning of giving power to people, of enabling people to make their own choices in matters directly affecting them? Is it possible for trade unions to achieve this for their members (or rather for the workers) without losing out themselves?

The search for a positive answer to these questions runs past several cul-de-sacs. We now have a whole shelf of research on human resource management which warns of the pitfalls that empowerment experiments might run into. While this literature is rich on work intensification in the name of empowerment, the loss of steam that awaits autonomous work groups once they have run through simple issues, and problems an apprehensive middle management might pose (see Brennan 1991; Connors & Romberg 1991; Marchington 1995), there is not very much work on the hurdles a determined trade union might place in the path. This is not without reason. Quite a lot of HRM research draws on experience in greenfield, non-union sites which have to date been the most fertile soil for such experimentation. With the trade union out of the picture, this work has tended to project non-union HRM as an alternative to union-centred industrial relations. As Guest (1990:389) observes: 'the main impact of HRM in the United States may have been to provide a smokescreen behind which management can introduce non-unionism or obtain significant concessions from trade unions.' In such a union-busting situation, of course, trade unions are in no position to look for any 'empowerment' potential.

The second cul-de-sac consists of those situations where unions are too feeble to compel attention even if they are present. They may be in no position to do anything but accept what management offers. Managements of these brownfield sites may not want to dismantle trade unions, but may not consult them either before embarking on an HRM initiative. With organised labour on the downswing, it is for unions to worry about how best to cope with change, not for managements to think of ways to carry the unions along. HRM may only be a parallel track here unlike in greenfield sites, but the expectation is that it would move to centre of stage by edging industrial relations to the margin, although perhaps not out of existence². There are ample illustrations where a trade union --sometimes under pressure from its shop-stewards-- had to accept team working, individualised compensation, and the creation of joint plant committees in a bid to retain new investments from being diverted

² Storey in his 1992 book describes it as "...not as a direct frontal assault but as a marginalization of their [trade unions'] role" (1992:249).

to another location³. The question is whether unions have been too concerned with job security and / or union security to recognise the potential for worker empowerment even where they are not faced with such adverse circumstances. What is this potential?

The literature distinguishes two related options: one strand indicates that management itself is engaged in a continuous process of giving meaning and content to its own new concepts. There are neither textbook solutions to the problems as perceived by them nor a meaning to HRM which must be treated as settled and sealed; so management proceed by trial and error, adjusting and adapting to unanticipated consequences and realities (see e.g. Streeck 1987; Hill 1991). Miguel Martinez Lucio in particular has addressed the complexity of implementation of HRM (Martinez Lucio & Weston 1992a, 1994; Martinez Lucio & Simpson 1992)⁴. This would mean that a determined union could well try and influence the outcome of managerial experiments in workers' favour (see e.g. Martinez Lucio & Weston 1992b). As David Guest (1995:134-5) concludes: 'Ironically, the inability of personnel and other managers to introduce effective HRM provides unions with an opportunity.... Rather than oppose HRM, unions should champion it, becoming more enthusiastic than management....They should turn management's HRM rhetoric back on them and transform it into reality.'

The other --related-- approach is moderately optimistic in identifying potential for 'genuine' empowerment for workers and unions. Delcourt (1987) discusses the prospects for increasing the rights of workers, not only vis-à-vis their employer, but also with regard to their union by increasing the pressure towards union democracy. Robertson et al.(1992⁵) express qualified optimism about improving the position of workers. Guest (1995) and Ryan (1992) indicate prospects for trade unions to mould the process to their advantage.

In the Indian case studies which we present below, the position of the trade union is strong, protected by legislation which provides for both job security and union security. This is ideal ground for combining well entrenched industrial relations with strong HRM, a

³ See Martinez Lucio & Weston, 1992 for an UK example; Gaudier 1988 and Fucini & Fucini 1990, for the USA.

⁴ In addition, there is a shelf of literature indicating that what is preached in theory is not exactly what is practised in reality. Moreover, the introduction of new managerial strategies is often piecemeal and/or haphazard; see e.g. Milkman 1992; Guest 1990; Wood 1991; Osterman 1994.

⁵ This 1992 report "provides half-time reflections on a longitudinal case study" The final report is far more pessimistic (CAW-Canada 1993). In a more recent report on the same case, the authors assert "...kaizen...can be appropriated by workers to achieve workers' objectives" but they also show that management retaliated by doing away with the gains workers had achieved for themselves (Rinehart 1994:163). If nothing else this underscores the need for longitudinal research.

theoretical possibility indicated by Storey (1992) of which there seem to be few examples⁶. What strategies might be appropriate for empowering employees where union power is in tact, or is any hope in this direction misplaced? How would a powerful union respond to management effort to gets its members to be more involved in shop-floor decisions? What implications do HRM and industrial relations have for each other? Can they have a parallel existence leaving each other well alone, or do they cross each other's path? If it is the latter, with what consequences? These questions which have implications for theory and practice are sought to be explored here in the context of India, which is among the latest comers to the world of competitive industrialisation⁷.

The Background

Before getting to the specifics of the two situations on which this paper is based, one must consider the backdrop against which labour and capital in India manage their relationship (for a more comprehensive description, see Ramaswamy 1995). Upon Independence in 1947, India placed its faith in centralised economic planning and built a command economy which had few parallels outside the Soviet bloc. Industrial enterprises were protected from external competition by tariff barriers and outright prohibition of imports, and from each other by the policy of industrial licensing. The public sector in particular could not fail as it was thought to serve a social rather than economic purpose. Capital made monopolistic profits from which labour grabbed a share for itself. All this changed in 1991 when, in conformity with the conditionalities imposed by international financial institutions for extending credit, the country embarked on a programme of structural adjustment and industrial liberalisation.

Competition has been stepping up in the years since these changes were introduced, but trade union power remains more or less unaffected. In a country of nine hundred million people, trade unions have a mere six million members. They have little presence outside the formal sector (made up of large and medium scale enterprises in manufacturing and the services) which employs just eight per cent of the working population, but within this

⁶ Recent developments, however, point to a change of trade union attitude. Geary describes the case of the German IG Metall union which defined characteristics of what constituted 'good team work' (1996:21). On Germany see also Kissler (1994) on quality circles, and Mahnkopf (1992) on trade union policy towards skill formation. For reports of union-management agreements at Rover in the UK see Harfield (1996) and at Zanussi in Italy see Castro (1996). Beaumont (1995) discusses recent trends in the TUC in Britain, Kumar (1995) reviews the discussion within the Canadian trade union movement, while O'Hehir & O'Mahony (1993) outline the options for the Irish trade Union Congress.

⁷ The introduction of HRM has mainly been studied in the European or American context. A few studies have appeared discussing new managerial strategies in a developmental perspective. See e.g. for Africa: Kamoche 1992; Maller 1992, 1994; Kaplinsky with Posthuma 1994; Arthur et al. 1995; Posthuma 1995. For Asia: Amante 1993; Humphrey 1993; Kaplinsky with Posthuma 1994; Morris & Wilkinson 1995; Lawler et al. 1995; For Latin America: Humphrey 1993, 1994; Kaplinsky with Posthuma 1994; Morris & Wilkinson 1995;

cloistered world they are quite a force. They are not only well organized with a membership density that can reach the proportions of a closed shop, but have the advantage of legislation inspired by notions of social justice that treats labour as the weaker party deserving of protection. The most important aspect of this protection is absolute and unqualified security for workers with tenured employment. They can be dismissed for gross misconduct (after a protracted judicial process) or induced with hefty parting packages to voluntarily retire, but not retrenched for being redundant. Nor can capital shut down a superfluous or unprofitable plant without government permission, which is seldom granted. Trade unions have retained their muscle by stalling reform of legislation over labour's right to organize, collectively represent and to strike⁸. Although macro policy reforms to suit the requirements of a market-oriented economy have been talked about, little has been accomplished. Managements looking to new human resource strategies to cope with competition know they cannot wait until policy changes tilt the balance in their favour: they have either to take the unions along or to take them on. The two cases analyzed in this paper reflect this thinking.

Boehringer Mannheim

Boehringer is a multinational engaged in the drugs and pharmaceuticals business, with a plant on the outskirts of Bombay and regional and zonal offices throughout India. The company is organized by a company-based union which has complete sway over the 600 strong workforce of the factory, besides enjoying considerable support among head office staff and medical representatives spread throughout the country. In line with the rest of the pharmaceutical industry, Boehringer paid its employees very well, but this did nothing to improve relations. On the contrary, good pay and working conditions seemed to be more indicative of poor relations: certainly, the union believed its policy of continuous struggle to be the fountainhead of employee well-being. The union was in the driver's seat, controlling output and leveraging this control to press its demands. The company was making money, but the scope for improving productivity was enormous.

Having concluded that industrial relations had nothing more to offer, the expatriate managing director decided to experiment with employee empowerment. He wanted not only better productivity but also improved relations: there seemed to be no reason why a company which paid and treated its employees well should be enveloped in oppressive

⁸ Unions can be formed under present laws with as few as seven members. Tiny unions with an uncertain membership can raise industrial disputes and set in motion conciliation and adjudication procedures. Strikes require a four week notice, but not a ballot to ascertain if workers want them. There are in any case no enforceable sanctions against illegal strikes. Trade unions have foiled repeated attempts - mostly half-hearted - by the government to update these laws.

distrust⁹. The widely shared managerial perception was that the problem lay neither with employees nor even with the union, but with one man --the all-powerful union secretary who epitomised the culture of adversity. Being in effect the union, he made it impossible for management to get past him to other office-bearers, let alone the ranks of workers. Skilfully using his mastery of the English language --in which he had an advantage over his fellow union committee members-- he created an effective barrier. Employee empowerment, the managing director hoped, would redress this situation by helping others to grow.

Extensive discussions were held with workers, middle managers, senior managers, and trade union leaders by a consultant called in to evolve a blueprint acceptable to all sections. Managers at the highest levels were not against an experiment in empowerment, especially because they thought of it as a distant shop-floor process which neither made a demand on them nor posed a threat to their powers. The ranks of workers had no reason not to be supportive: at the receiving end of orders, whether from management or their own union, they were for the first time getting an opportunity to speak out. As is to be expected, opposition came from middle managers, and even more the trade union. Middle managers did not think that empowered workers would be up to any good, but not being an organized group they could not stall the process.

Far more serious was the union's opposition: for all their enthusiasm, workers were certain to stay off small group activity if the union asked them to. The union had no interest at all in shop-floor empowerment. While agreeing that poor productivity could push the company into losses and put jobs in jeopardy, the union leaders attributed every problem to bad management. The secretary claimed that the company would be in better health if only management would have listened to him on a range of issues from finance and marketing to corporate policy. As for small group activity, his view was simply that a union was not necessary if workers could take their own decisions. The managing director was in the meanwhile toying with radical ideas: he wanted small groups made up of workers, supervisors and middle managers not only empowered to take work-related decisions but also provided the money with which to implement them.

There was nothing in his proposals to threaten the union since the work groups were to leave bargained issues well alone and concentrate on quality, productivity, safety, and efficient material usage. To further reassure the leadership that union-bashing was not the objective, management offered to create a second-tier which would draw the union into a participative relationship over the very same issues. The leaders were unimpressed -- it was to manage quality, productivity and the like, they argued, that the company had appointed

⁹ Beaumont and Harris report a similar finding regarding managerial motives for introducing HRM practices in the UK ('...to improve the existing state of industrial relations.') (1996:402).

so many managers. The leaders were cast in the classic mould of adversity: they wanted no responsibility either for themselves or for their members in the nitty-gritty of production, but expected their pronouncements on distant managerial issues to be taken seriously. The union did eventually budge from this position, but only after much persuasion. While several factors played a part, the argument that middle managers were more likely to improve their performance in response to capillary pressure from below than hierarchical pressure from above seemed to have weighed especially with the union committee. They saw in work groups the opportunity to put shop-floor managers on the mat.

With union opposition softened, a conference of all stakeholders was called to hammer out the details. In preparation, the company sent away on early retirement the chief of personnel, a trench-warrior brought up in the old school, and asked the young factory personnel manager to steer the effort. The conference was presented a hybrid structure that combined the elements of HRM and participatory management (leaving collective bargaining in tact), which seemed best suited to a unionised environment. At the base of the new structure were to be scores of small groups called workstations bringing together everyone in a section -- whether worker, supervisor or manager-- to discuss quality, productivity and safety. Unlike quality circles or kaizen where only suggestions can be made, these groups were empowered to take decisions without approval from any higher authority, but all decisions had to be unanimous. In addition, the workstations themselves had to elect a chairperson and secretary.

More importantly, 20% of every division's budget was to be handed over to workstations, to be spent on giving effect to these decisions, once again without the requirement of any external sanction. All this was way beyond what work groups were being offered anywhere.

The second tier was made up of six shop councils, one for each major area of activity. The councils were assigned 30% of the division's budget and asked to take up much the same issues as workstations, but at a higher level. The union and management were to nominate the members of the councils in equal number, the only restriction being that the nominees had to be employed in the concerned section or department. The real intent behind the creation of shop councils was to recognize the existence of the union and bring it within the ambit of cooperation even as bridges were built with individual workers. Together, the workstations and shop councils were handed over one half of the budget of every division, seriously abridging the financial powers of senior managers.

The union was immediately up in arms. The general-secretary who thought the objective of the entire scheme was to sideline him, wanted no restriction on union freedom to nominate anyone to shop councils¹⁰. This in effect meant that he would be on all six, dominating

¹⁰ An election to arrive at the union representatives was out of the question.

them as he did industrial relations, and defeating management's very objective of decentralisation. More fundamentally, he argued that the union was prepared to shift from adversity to cooperation if management would travel the entire distance and offer them parity representation on the Board of Directors. The managing director had privately indicated his willingness to create a third level which would enable union leaders to participate with vice-presidents and himself in policy decisions, but formal membership of the board was a different matter in a country where participation at any level was a non-starter¹¹. Knowing that parity on the board was an impossibility, the union was in fact raising the demand to scuttle the proceedings. Some behind-the-scene lobbying finally helped to bring the union around, the price of its consent being freedom to nominate anyone it wished to the shop councils. The union's faith in adversarial relations remained intact, but its consent to workstations seemed to offer management a toehold upon which to build a more positive relationship.

Workstations which were asked to meet for an hour during working hours every two weeks began their work right away and settled down before long to serious discussions, and even to some decisions. Most of the early decisions were small, some even trivial, but being a part of the learning experience not exactly insignificant. As happens with all such groups, problems began to surface once the easy and non-controversial issues had been run through. While lighting and ventilation posed little difficulty¹², managers began stonewalling discussion when it came to such core areas as quality and productivity. Workstation meetings were lively, but contentious. Workers questioned managers on poor or wasteful manufacturing practices, while the latter ducked and parried, and hoped the storm would blow over. Trade union activists were especially active, asking managers to pay attention to quality problems, wasted materials, machine breakdowns and the like. Managers were reactive, their disinterest showing above all in the lack of preparation for meetings. With workers proactive and managers reactive, workstations were beginning to polarise between opposing groups of 'them' and 'us'.

In line with what HRM literature would lead us to expect, middle managers were hardly enthusiastic about shop-floor empowerment, but they were not entirely to blame. Most managers at this level were unsure of their powers, and did not quite know how far they could go in supporting a decision. Illustrative of this was a section chief; he was blocking

¹¹ India has a long tradition of talking about participatory management without achieving very much. The farthest it has gone is to symbolically nominate an employee representative (often a professional trade unionist chosen by the government rather than by employees) to the boards of a few large public sector enterprises. The private sector has never been supportive of participation at any level, and trade unions have been especially hostile.

¹² Unlike the Canadian experience described above, the financial powers given to the workstations to execute their decisions meant indeed that "the human problems" or "the comfort issues" were easily settled.

the suggestion for a hydraulic lift to decant heavy drums of chemicals because his vice-president thought it absurd for a labour-surplus company to invest in a labour-saving device. The section chief was being asked to democratically determine the very issues his superiors were treating hierarchically. A review six months down the line further confirmed that middle and senior managers were safely ensconced in enclaves of privilege, leaving those lower down to battle it out in workstations. Departmental heads, one level above section chiefs, were supposed to be on shop councils, discussing with union nominees the very same issues of quality, safety and productivity, but not a single council had met in six months although plenty of unresolved issues had been referred to them by workstations. While managers took no initiative, the union seemed similarly uninterested: it had not even named its representatives to these bodies.

Managers at more senior levels --that of general manager and vice-president-- seemed further removed from the happenings below. They expected workstations and shop councils to enhance productivity and contribute to trust relations without themselves making any contribution to the process. Some twenty senior executives brought together to discuss these issues were asked what they would do if a workstation sought their approval for a decision, especially one involving an expenditure. The first, from finance, said he would approve the decision only if it enhanced productivity and protected the interest of the firm. Others who followed embellished his answer with further provisos and qualifications until someone rocked the boat with the comment that his consent was of no consequence since workstations had the power to take their own decisions. Someone asked the lone dissenter what he would do if a station used its money to organize a picnic. He replied that he saw nothing wrong with the decision, but others intervened to say that senior executives had to come down on such misuse of company money. For all this, few stations were spending the money given to them. It was not merely that decisions involving major expenditure were not being taken; workers were becoming tight-fisted with money they now considered their own.

As the review got under way, the union was hardly in a mood to discuss worker empowerment. Boehringer was running into serious financial difficulties because of cheap imports from China. After lobbying in vain for anti-dumping duties, management decided to shut down the chemicals plant and ask its 150 workers to stay home with full wages, an obvious prelude to early retirement. The union hit back immediately by asking its members in the formulations plant (which was open) to boycott workstations. Workers had been asked just weeks before what would happen if workstations were scrapped; their unanimous answer was that managers would be relieved and the union happy, whereas they themselves would feel terribly aggrieved. And yet, the entire workforce obeyed the union's call without question.

The next few months saw the company announce a voluntary retirement package for redundant workers, and the union embark on the warpath in retaliation. Since there was little point in striking a plant which was asking workers to stay home with full wages, the union turned its ire on HRM. While workers saw in workstations the potential to shape their work and hold their managers accountable, the union saw them as a favour to management which weakened labour's resolve and diminished its ability to fight industrial relations battles. Arguing that the problem lay neither with markets nor with workers but in management ineptitude, the union sought help from courts to open the chemicals plant. It also asked workers not to accept voluntary retirement, but seventy workers (out of the 150 affected) quit nevertheless. A year after these events, the company found a buyer willing to take over the closed plant along with the remaining eighty workers, but the union now preferred voluntary retirement to the promises of an unknown employer. Boehringer finally sold, after two years of turmoil, the loss-making plant and retired its workers, but it is hard to tell if the workstations will meet again in what is left of the company.

Bharat Electronics

The Bangalore plant of the state-owned Bharat Electronics is an enormous manufacturing facility employing over 10,000 people to produce radar and sonar for the defence forces, broadcasting equipment for radio and TV, communication equipment for the country's telephone system, integrated circuits, silicon wafers, printed circuit boards, TV picture tubes and a host of other electronic devices and components. The four trade unions organizing the plant (two of them recognized) have cordial relations with management, but productivity has been abysmal. Three-fourths of the plant's modest production target is met in the last quarter of the year, and close to one-half in the last one month. It is a laid-back work ethic, with hundreds let off for trade union work, a quarter of the work-force idling away, and the rest putting in no more than a couple of hours on the average. Quite a lot of the stagnant turnover comes, in fact, from sub-contractors.

When changing government policies began to threaten the plant's already precarious existence, management decided to experiment with workers' participation. A shop council was set up for each of the sixteen divisions (some of which are so big as to be independent units) and a plant council was installed to oversee their work. In addition to the familiar issues of quality and productivity, the councils were asked to take a look at production planning and inventory levels. Membership of the shop council was by nomination, the trade unions nominating workers, and the division head (a deputy or assistant general manager) who chaired the council nominating managers. Together it was a high power team, since most issues were in any case within the ambit of the division head. As a result, the shop councils had the power to decide, although this was not explicitly stated. The company called this participatory management, but the issues that came up for discussion as also the

responses of workers and managers bore a distinct similarity to Boehringer which called its experiment HRM.

The two recognized unions responded to the shop councils predictably. While no one was interested in handing over bargained issues to participative fora, the unions also wanted to keep out such consultative issues as safety, manpower deployment and the scrutiny of sub-contracts. The unions not only considered them to be part of their prerogative, but used the many joint committees (whose membership conferred time-off from work) to distribute patronage. Even the shop councils became instruments for such patronage distribution, adding to the hundreds who were already busy with representational responsibilities. While the unions too admitted to this, there was little evidence of this political imperative influencing either the issues labour raised in shop councils, or the quality of the debate.

The initial fear of managers was that unions would use shop councils as yet another forum to vent their spleen, especially given that labour's nominees were staunch unionists, but this was not what happened. Once in shop councils, workers behaved more as workers than as trade union representatives, raising issues related to productivity, quality, wastage, targets and turnover. For someone who knew Boehringer, the issues had a familiar ring. Why were expensive machines allowed to idle? Why was productivity not picking up? Why was production bunched in the last quarter and not spread out more evenly? Why were jobs sub-contracted when there was idle capacity in-house? Why were quality problems persisting in spite of customer complaints? Why was wastage so high?

Some councils had moved from these generalities to specifics. The TV Tubes division was illustrative: a meeting of its shop council discussed ways to improve the loading of TV shells on to the oven for baking and reduce the breakage of expensive shells, developed a better lubrication schedule for the production line, and suggested more frequent greasing of equipment exposed to high oven temperatures. The council also decided to multi-skill workers through job rotation, while agreeing with the chairman that some workers were so skilled that it was dysfunctional to move them. In spite of these useful decisions, the council was lost in seething frustration. Managers were not keen on meetings, and they were meeting not every month as prescribed but after three months. More importantly, the council seemed to be incapable of cracking the truly fundamental issues which weighed them down. They had serious quality problems with the electron guns supplied by the division next door, but managers were applying the damper every time the issue came up. Workers wanted to shame Electron Tube Fabrication by dumping the rejected pieces at their doorstep, but even this was not being done. Significantly, workers in Electron Tubes knew of the problem and had raised it in their own shop council, without once again being able to get managers to travel along. TV Tubes was also wasting a lot of expensive glass because it bought the shells from a sister unit in unsuitable dimensions. Hopping mad at the refusal of managers

to get to the bottom of the issue, a worker said he was going to ask the next meeting to come up with suggestions for increasing wastage. Burdened with high costs, stagnant technology and poor productivity, TV Tubes was in imminent danger of closure (it did close eventually), but managers did not think that the shop council had any solutions to offer.

TV Tubes was by no means the worst of the lot: it could resolve routine problems although flat-footed over fundamental issues, whereas managers elsewhere hedged so much that no decision was at all possible. In Naval Equipments workers produced a list of expensive CNC machines which were idling for want of operators, an unbelievable absurdity for a vastly overmanned factory. The problem was that unions, managers and anyone else who could distribute patronage was transferring workers from direct production jobs to indirect functions such as inspection, support services, office jobs and the like which were not only less demanding but offered the convenience of the day shift. As a result, the plant was short of hands where they were needed although saddled with an enormous surplus. Workers were suggesting that Naval Equipments attract indirect workers back to direct work by taking advantage of a collective agreement offering quicker promotions to those willing to return, to the obvious discomfiture of a union secretary attending the meeting as an observer. The leader kept mumbling that he would not allow the council to transgress union domain, but strangely the head of the division too mumbled that this was a matter between unions and management which the council could not enter. This was not the first time the issue was coming up in the council; workers had compiled a list of idle machine tools after the chairman had claimed in an earlier meeting that the problem was being exaggerated. The council then moved on to a quality problem. A worker pulled out a metal piece from his pocket and asked the chairman to judge the quality of its electroplating. The silver-plating was peeling off, but the chairman said this was a technical problem that could not be taken up in the council. The worker would not give up; he claimed that such shoddy materials would surely cause a sophisticated piece of naval communication equipment to malfunction. Quality, he said, had to be checked at the point of production, not at the point of inspection. He wanted an investigation into how such practices could escape notice until they reached final inspection, but the chairman was evasive. Participation was turning out to be a frustrating experience for workers: while they were keen to take on such central issues as quality, productivity, machine availability and material utilisation, managers were pushing everything under the carpet. Workers complained that senior managers did not take kindly to suggestions from the ranks, but level did not explain everything: many managers were also thought to have an interest in syphoning work to sub-contractors for a consideration.

It was quite obvious that few managers had any interest in participation. A meeting of chairmen of shop councils called to review the scheme admitted that it was workers and not managers who set the agenda, but argued that there was not much to be gained by discussing work related issues with trade unionists. They wanted labour to be represented

by competent workers, and some even suggested that this was best accomplished by asking managers to nominate them. This did not mean that managers had no expectations from shop councils. In their view, the really important requirement was to improve labour utilisation; if only the hundreds of workers wandering about the place could be persuaded to put in a few hours of work, productivity was bound to improve. With staunch trade unionists representing labour, the expectation was that they would put some sense into these laggards. This was what managers expected of the union as well, but since the union had not done the job, the shop council became the surrogate. As a result, while workers talked of quality, wastage, machine utilisation and the like, managers talked of the need to restrict coffee and lunch breaks and bring down absenteeism. They also spoke about markets, customers, production targets set and achieved, order book position etc. and wrapped up meetings with an appeal to labour to cooperate in improving standard hours¹³. This divergence in approach and expectations locked the shop councils in a question and answer mode: while workers shot questions, the chairman defended himself as best as he could and middle managers simply sat and watched the proceedings.

Participation did not rank high in union priorities either, although it might have in that of unionists. Concerned to protect their own turf, the two recognized unions defined participatory management by exclusion: not only had bargaining rights to be protected from encroachment by shop and plant councils, but also the many joint committees. The encroachment came, however, not from managers but from their own activists. The secretaries of many councils (nominated by the union) were listing such forbidden topics as sub-contracting, safety, manpower deployment etc. in the agenda for the reason that work-related issues (such as idling machines, for example) could not be discussed without stepping across the frontier. Union leaders expressed their displeasure at this, but whether they could have prevented such discussion is difficult to tell since, faced with indifferent managers who also wanted to abridge the scope of participation, few councils got into a problem solving mode.

Union indifference came through in other ways as well. It was clear that managers were blocking the progress of the councils, and a review of the scheme said so in no uncertain terms. A union interested in strengthening the councils could have easily used the report for pressurising top management into remedial action, but nothing of the kind happened. Worse still, the secretaries of the two unions whose job it was to summon the plant council had not scheduled a single meeting. The unions took the view that it was management, or perhaps

¹³ Industrial engineering has established standards for every job by specifying the person-hours needed for its completion. What managers do is to work backwards by converting production into standard hours realised. Trade unions don't contest the method, since management seldom goes beyond lamenting the low standard hour clearance. A realisation of 140 hours (or a little over 5 hours per person-day) would be considered excellent, but most divisions hover around 100 hours.

the enterprise, which needed participation, not they themselves or their members. They either did not see in the councils any potential for empowerment of labour, or were not interested in such empowerment as was offered. The similarity with Boehringer is unmistakable, although the Boehringer union was dealing with HRM whereas in Bharat Electronics it was participation. Neither HRM nor participation posed any threat to trade unions, direct or indirect. They not only left union prerogatives well alone, but created additional space for union involvement in the non-bargained realm of production. Neither union was interested in taking up this space, as witnessed by their failure to summon fora in which they had representation. Nor had they any interest in fora where their members sat with managers to discuss work. The only difference was that Bharat Electronics unions did not kill participation; they simply let it wither away. They got busy with collective bargaining when the long-term wage agreement ran its course, a process that can take years and absorb an enormous lot of energy in the highly centralizing Indian public sector. They also mounted a campaign to demand for labour a share in the company's stock which the government has been divesting. Together, this was sufficient to push participation into the distant background.

Trade Unions and Human Resource Management

There is little prospect of promoting HRM in a strongly unionised environment without regard for industrial relations. HRM can not only not be treated as a stand-alone process in such a situation, but must be considered the subordinate partner which cannot grow, perhaps not even be born, except under the gaze of industrial relations. This comes in sharp contrast to Storey's depiction of the situation in the UK where HRM has not only grown as a parallel process but also the more favoured one, entrusted to better qualified managers unlike industrial relations which is left to the care of hackneyed trench warriors (1992:258-262). The difference consists of course in union power.

Where unions are powerful, it is all too easy for HRM to be sucked into the whirlpool of industrial relations. Management would find it hard to keep the two processes apart, much as they might want to, because for unions industrial relations will always have primacy. Trade unions can scarcely resist the opportunities offered by HRM to add to their arsenal of strategies or fight industrial relations battles. There are other firms in India, besides the two discussed in this paper, where HRM finds itself in an identical predicament - a fledgling hoping to grow under the not-so-benign gaze of industrial relations. A tea packing plant of Lever, the Anglo-Dutch multinational, offers an excellent case in point. Since their two unions were a lot more peaceable, management set up an autonomous work group on an experimental basis without even consulting them. The group which packs instant tea bags is, from all accounts, an immediate success: workers have spruced up their workplace, come up with ways to improve quality and save on materials, and enjoy their new found autonomy. A worker

explained that the paper used for bagging and the metal wire used to staple the bags now have an importance they never had before. They have demanded and got better materials to make sure that bags don't break when the tea is brewed and ruin their brand image. Apart from improving quality, management also hope to reduce or even eliminate supervision. Workers know their job, and supervisors are employed for managerial rather than technical reasons. The plant is already lean, and the removal of a level would be no small achievement. The two unions have so far watched all this from the sidelines. When they were invited to a discussion of autonomous group working, they scarcely uttered a word on the subject, focusing instead on the impending wage bargain. They regretted having signed up for five years in a country where living costs were rising by the day, and harped on management's refusal to honour bargained agreements to employ workers' children. They said they had no objection to autonomous groups so long as industrial relations demands were met to their satisfaction, and added that it would be no problem at all to direct workers to pull out of the experiment. A worker who had earlier in the day narrated with obvious pride the improvements in productivity and hygiene after the introduction of group work nodded in agreement, making it clear that they were not far different from Boehringer.

Trade unions have much reason to fear HRM, especially if it is introduced without consultation, and as a parallel process. As is borne out by much of the literature, the empowerment that managements offer might only be rhetoric, a camouflage for speeding up the labour process by tapping into workers' creativity. As Fucini and Fucini convincingly argue, management might want nothing more than 57 seconds of peak performance out of every 60. 'Workers', as Laurie Graham (1994:148) observes of a US firm, 'were seldom allowed to make even the most inconsequential decision on their own. Kaizen provided a mechanism for keeping decisions under the tight control of management.' In such an environment it should come as no surprise if unions cling to their adversarial repertoire. What they see is, after all, nothing but managerial adversarialism cloaked in attractive language¹⁴. A trade union might sometimes be noticeably torn between two competing ends, as illustrated by a South African unionist (Daphne 1994:88): '...worker participation needs to entail proactive, adversarial participation from an empowered position, be implemented through extended collective bargaining, and have as its overall objective the transformation of shopfloor power relations, with resulting benefits. A successful participatory scheme will result in increased levels of co-operation over a wide range of issues, between management and workers, through the empowerment of workers...'

The problem, as our two Indian cases show, could also be that trade unions come up with a special meaning to their mission. By wanting nothing more than the survival of

¹⁴ In this context, also see Perline & Sexton 1994; Voos & Cheng 1989.

adversarialism, they could become just as narrowly aggrandizing as management. They might oppose HRM not because it poses any threat, but for fear that worker identification with organizational objectives could dilute the spirit of adversity. That appears to have been the case in Boehringer and Bharat Electronics, much more in the former than in the latter. In neither case was there any real threat to trade union power, unless adversity itself is seen to be the ultimate source of that power. Boehringer's effort to draw in the union by combining elements of HRM with collective bargaining and participatory management must in particular count as a unique effort to balance aspects of unitarism and pluralism. The firm also went way beyond anything that kaizen and quality circles might offer by way of empowerment. This was not cosmetic window dressing or sophisticated managerialism, but, to the extent one could discern at this point in time, a genuine effort at decentralized decision making. The union's opposition to it was a clear sign that it was wedded to adversity both as a means and as an end.

It is interesting to conjecture what the outcome of the coexistence of HRM and industrial relations over a period of time might be. It is difficult to see them as parallel tracks that do not intersect, unless a trade union is either moribund or non-existent. There is already enough material to show that, without the chastening presence of a trade union, HRM could easily degenerate into a souped-up version of Taylorist-Fordist production. With kaizen workers lubricating the speed-up of the labour process, this new incarnation would not even need industrial engineers. The presence of a countervailing force in the form of a trade union, it has become increasingly clear, is necessary if HRM is to deliver on its promise.

On the other hand, a trade union's addiction to adversity begs the question: what makes adversity so attractive to union leaders in the face of prospects for empowerment? Or, paraphrasing the words of the General Secretary of the British TUC, trade unions know how to fight the bad employer, but do they know to address the good one (Monks 1996)? It might be that adversity is not only the time-tested method of dealing with management but also perhaps the easiest way to deal with their own members. With adversarial collective bargaining, the need for mobilizing members is limited to the period when a new settlement comes up for negotiation. In the interregnum between settlements, which could be several years, there is little need to closely involve workers in union affairs. A narrow focus on wages also reduces the need for interaction with members, for, as everyone knows, the expectation is that the leaders should get the most out of management. Adversity, low levels of membership participation in the union and low standards of internal democracy seem not only to go very well together, but actually reinforce each other.

Management-driven empowerment rocks this placid boat. Workers who become involved in shop floor decisions on quality, productivity and work organization would develop an interest in the firm which compromises their sense of adversity. Moreover, such workers would no

longer be satisfied with simple forms of wage bargaining. The union would be forced to take on board a wider range of issues, and this would require a more active and continuous dialogue with members. Not only would an enlarged agenda require such a dialogue, but a more empowered labour force would demand such involvement. Empowerment of workers will not stop at the shopfloor but will have a wider impact on worker attitudes, including their attitudes towards their own union. This is not a situation which a leadership distanced from the shop-floor and an understanding of trade unionism limited to the wage demand can easily cope with. The HRM challenge will require trade unions to metamorphose their internal decision making structures. This is already evident where national unions have been forced by pressure from branches and shop stewards to take a more positive stance towards HRM initiatives (see in particular Kumar 1995, on Canada; Beaumont 1991 and 1995 on USA and UK). In a policy document, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions visualises a scenario which would allow for a flexible approach (O'Hehir & O'Mahony 1993) that leaves the details of work organization to local trade union officials and shopfloor representatives. This would require from the trade union a different role: as champions of indirect representation they would now have to facilitate processes which give a greater say to lower levels in their own organisations, and even to workers outside their organisation. More than ever before, unions have to actively address non-members in the workplace. Education and training assume greater importance in union activities than before because of the need for a proactive response (see e.g. Kumar 1995). This is certainly difficult, and even more so in a developmental context as the discussion between Holdt (1995) and Lehlere (1995) on changes in South Africa would indicate.

All this leads us to ask what would become of the trade union if it exists alongside HRM. This is one question to which the literature offers few leads, because those who talk of the demise of the union have in view situations where the union is absent, not those where it is vigorously present. The answer might well be that HRM is, for trade unions, the much needed shot in the arm. Empowerment of the ranks might hold a more effective cure to the oligarchic somnolence of trade unions than periodic elections, strategic placement of ballot boxes, frequent turnover of office bearers and the rest of the prescriptions held out by democratic theorists.

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