

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

The African e-Journals Project has digitized full text of articles of eleven social science and humanities journals. This item is from the digital archive maintained by Michigan State University Library. Find more at:

<http://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/africanjournals/>

Available through a partnership with



Scroll down to read the article.

WORKER PARTICIPATION

Review of Judy Maller (1992) - *Conflict and Co-operation; case studies in worker participation* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press).

Bill Freund

If there is a distinctive call within the socialist project in South Africa that comes out of South African experience, it is the call for worker participation. Few, if any, demands for nationalisation or any sort of restructuring of the firm, lack such a call. This stems to a large extent from the experience of the trade union movement in the 1980s, from the emphasis that it has laid on worker democracy and on the challenge to management prerogative on the shopfloor. To some degree, this pressure has been met by a reformist response from South African management, which this book attempts to assess.

As Judy Maller explains in this useful study, sensitivity to the issue of worker participation is not due to the force of South African politics alone as to a more basic contradiction in industrial capitalism generally, one that is becoming rapidly more salient as the industrial character of production shifts in the late-twentieth century. Capital 'needs to organise the forces and relations of production in a way that develops the social productivity of labour as much as it alienates it' (p5). Just as the slave system came up against the impossibility of the whip getting workers to produce with any efficiency or involvement so capitalism is now coming up against the limits of what the Taylorist regime can extract in terms of its own needs for extended accumulation. For capital, the challenge lies in finding a means of involving workers in their own exploitation in such a way as to create a co-operative structure where authority is diffused and involvement maximised without giving away real power. For labour, the challenge is increasingly one to find ways of using the openings in new techniques and structures that will benefit workers and genuinely democratise power. Maller feels there can be no rejection of this challenge: 'labour needs to take advantage of capital's contradictory needs in the workplace so as to benefit workers' (p14).

Most of this book consists of three case studies, well-enough known in the business literature but all of which the author has researched herself, which tend to demonstrate the limited possibilities thus far of worker participation in the South African context. Jabula Foods, an unprofitable and probably overmanned producer of basic dried foodstuffs on the east Rand, is the most negative example of the three. Worker participation here is artificial and superficial. Management interest in participation is reduced by the nature of the plant and labour process which offers little scope for empowerment of workers through enskilling. Worker views of management are extremely harsh and best expressed in terms of knock-out struggle. A strongly supported union is constantly engaged in challenges over the basic content of work, not unmarked by violence. Management are very anxious to destroy

union power and continue to rely significantly on white skilled and supervisory labour which is deeply antagonistic to union militancy. In this context, head office plans for worker involvement in production can have little purchase even though ownership links Jabula to the generally more liberal Premier group.

Volkswagen SA benefits from the sophistication of a very successful international operation. Some aspects of consultation and involvement have been enacted effectively at the Uitenhage plant while acceptance of trade unionism as a permanent feature of society is more widespread amongst management. However, conflictual relations are still heavily dominant and attempts to imitate the smooth flow of goods and people which has given the Japanese car industry such an international edge have not amounted to much. Although pay is good by local standards and there is a tendency for workers to stay on the job for many years, workers have to support a wide number of dependents, diffusing their prosperity enormously and the character of NUMSA democracy tends to empower the most politically militant and active who know how to make a meeting work in their interests. Management in the end see the union as the chief 'stumbling block' to creating a rational production system and there is some co-operation but little love lost between what clearly remain two antagonists. It makes a superb case study of the very contradictions that Maller highlights and would repay a much longer investigation.

Finally, Maller discusses the unusual case of Cashbuild where worker participation has been quite successful. Cashbuild is a network of autonomous shops that sell building materials to a mainly township clientele outside the main urban centres. Its workforce is small and very differentiated between sales and labouring staff; trade union involvement is of little or no importance. The language of participation in Cashbuild has a distinctively South African and paternalist ring but it has achieved some acceptance amongst workers for a variety of participatory structures. Perhaps most crucially, workers seem to accept the idea of the pay packet being related to the success of the branch they work in. Maller is reluctant to celebrate Cashbuild's success, given her strong union commitment and the reality that management power is not seriously affected by the participatory structures in Cashbuild, but is probably on strong ground in pointing to the limited applicability of such a model to the industrial forum. Nonetheless, the Cashbuild way probably is as close a model to a South African prototype of Far Eastern production culture as one could find.

Maller has done a valuable service in looking at industry in a way that statistical analyses of economic trends would never succeed in doing. She exposes the shallowness and contradictions in management participation strategies on the one hand and the deep, even violent, gulf that exists between capital and labour in many contexts. She suggests that the way forward is a slow and rocky one, although she necessarily has to factor out the question of political change at the top. But it is a way that has to be forged if South Africa's uncompetitive industries, operating with far too little diffusion of managerial and technical skills, not geared to mass market consumption and at first sight textbook examples of the stark class conflict envisioned in *The Communist Manifesto*, will learn to operate more effectively in the sphere of world competition.