

'Worker control': *new meanings?*

For employers

"Management will have to give up control in order to keep it"

Andrew Levy

For unions

"Workers' control ...means participation"

At a recent management seminar, speakers supported 'worker control' and centralised bargaining. KARL VON HOLDT reports.

Worker control, according to management consultant Andrew Levy, is changing its meaning.

"Five years ago," he says, "when unionists spoke about worker control, they meant booting management out of the factory and running it themselves. Now what they mean is *participation* - worker participation at every level. Nothing will happen in this society without the participation of labour through negotiation."

He was speaking at the annual Andrew Levy Horizons Seminar, held in November last year. The theme of the seminar was centralised bargaining. "Both management and labour will exist in the new SA, and COSATU accepts this. The central issue will be *control* - the debate over bargaining forums is actually a debate over access to control. Control will be moving away from management."

Levy said that worker involvement in control would take place at national level (through the NMC), industrial level (industrial councils) and plant level.

At the national level every issue facing labour would be negotiated, and this would mean joint determination and a degree of centralised planning. At the industry level, the industrial council system would have to be extended to areas where it does not exist. The agenda of industrial council bargaining would be extended to include commercial issues.

At plant level, Levy expects to see a statutory system of workers' committees which will have veto rights. "There will be a tremendous extension of the scope of collective bargaining at plant level - unions will be involved in job evaluation, promotion and training."

Centralised bargaining

A key speaker from industry was Brian Angus, executive director of the metal and engineering employers organisation (SEIFSA). He emphasised that in future bargaining agendas are going to be "much broader". "We are going to have to be prepared to negotiate over many issues we are used to deciding alone." Furthermore, if employers wish to grow and survive, they themselves are going to have to broaden the agenda to include things like productivity.

This would entail an increasing shift towards centralised bargaining. Angus mentioned that he has been involved in "sensitive" discussions in two industries which are considering establishing industrial councils.

Angus expects some of the following issues to appear in the bargaining agenda:

Unemployment and job

creation. There will have to be a "massive negotiated job creation programme", but the unions will also have to give trade offs: "many employers are laying off because they are fed up with unions".

- Productivity. "Our productivity record is dismal and needs to improve on a massive scale. Employers cannot do it alone, they will have to negotiate with workers."
- Social security programmes.
- Affirmative action programmes. "Human resource managers encounter resistance from hardline bottom managers, but there will be increasing pressure from government and unions."
- Worker participation in decision-making about strategic business planning, investment and purchase of equipment.

Angus argued that a prerequisite for success is to create a common vision on many of these issues. "The recession is forcing unions to confront the need for growth and development."

Social partnership - or step towards socialism?

There seems to be a new tendency among some key sectors of management to accept centralised bargaining. This comes after the concerted attack on centralised bargaining led by Barlow Rand in the mid- to late 1980s. One factor is that employers probably realise that

Centralised bargaining by sector

The following sectors are mainly centralised:

- Metal and engineering (IC)
- Mining (Chamber)
- Motor (IC)
- Motor Assembly (NBF)
- Furniture (several strong ICs)
- Footwear

The following are mixed:

- Textiles (some centralisation, especially in W Cape)
- Construction (larger companies in ICs)
- Food (ICs cover meat, sugar, sweets, biscuits)

The following are decentralised:

- Chemical
- Paper/printing
- Retail
- Transport
- Cleaning
- Hotel

they will be unable to resist this demand forever, especially with the political developments in the country. The transition towards democracy is strengthening the labour movement, and is likely to result in a government far more sensitive to the labour constituency.

Another factor is that the most far-seeing employers - such as PGBison - are beginning to see enormous potential benefits for themselves in co-operating with labour and building a 'social partnership'. As Levy puts it: "The new meaning of workers control is infinitely better than the meaning of 'workers control' ten years ago. If that is the ~~single~~ ~~off~~ ~~for~~ ~~ditching~~ ~~rationalisation~~ ~~and~~ ~~socialism~~, it's a worthwhile compromise. It's ironic that management will have to give up some of its control in order to keep it."

Practically speaking, Levy is probably accurate in

arguing that the meaning of 'workers control' in the labour movement has shifted from 'takeover' to 'participation'. But is this simply a phase in a more radical, longer term project?

Within the union movement there is an urgent need to discuss these issues. How should unions engage with workers participation projects? How to take forward the struggle for increasing workers control? Do such projects mean abandoning socialism for a 'reformist' social democratic vision? Or are they steps on the long road of a democratic struggle for participatory socialism?

Clear strategies have not yet been developed in the labour movement. This is highlighted by the fact that NUM's performance bonus agreement in the gold mining industry has just been rejected by the worker leadership. ☆