

INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY IN ZIMBABWE?

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THIS ARTICLE SEEKS to provide a brief examination of Zimbabwe's industrial relations as seen, firstly, from my academic research during the period 1981-1985 in a mining company north of Harare and, secondly, from my intimate work knowledge and experience in a number of companies from 1981 to date. My emphasis is not so much on its history nor on the theoretical models on which the independent Zimbabwean government's policy of industrial democracy has been based, but on the viability of the workers' committees and works councils in terms of their effectiveness in democratizing decision-making in Zimbabwean industry.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Since settler occupation in 1890, successive governments in Rhodesia encouraged economic development along capitalist and racist lines. Racist policies and practices ensured that control of the economy remained in White hands while severely limiting the diffusion of technological and scientific skills among Blacks.

In the hierarchical order of Rhodesia, the Black stood at the lowest level, and the African worker stood under two interlocking handicaps. As an African, he was subjected to the overall system of discrimination; as a worker, he was also a victim of particular regulations which, prior to the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1959, prevented African workers from participating in the determination of their conditions of service by excluding them from the definition of 'employee'. African advancement was allowed only to the extent and in so far as it did not threaten the position of the Whites. Prime Minister Huggins explained:

The European in the country can be likened to an island of White in a sea of Black, with the artisan and tradesman forming the shores and the professional classes the highlands in the centre. Is the native to be allowed to erode away the shores and gradually attack the highlands? To permit this would mean that the leaven of civilization would be removed from the country, and the Black man would inevitably revert to barbarism worse than ever before . . . In the European area, the Black man will be welcomed, when, tempted by big wages, he offers his services as a labourer, but it will be on the understanding that he shall merely assist, not compete with, the White man (Bowman, 1973, 14-15).

Although the original Industrial Conciliation Act was substantially amended

in 1959, *inter alia* to incorporate African workers into the definition of employee and allow for the existence and legal operation of African trade unions, these unions generally functioned as consultative bodies, without the power to participate in decision-making. This position remained much the same throughout the period of 'transitional government' (1977-9) until Zimbabwe gained political independence in 1980.

However, in its 1981 'Growth with Equity' policy statement (Zimbabwe 1981a), the first government of independent Zimbabwe explicitly stated its commitment to changing the structure of industrial relations in the country, from one characterized by total employer domination to one characterized by worker participation in decision-making. To this end, government encouraged the introduction of workers' committees and works councils, the combined function of which was supposed to be the democratization of decision-making in industry and the improvement of labour-management relations.

THE PROBLEMS OF WORKER PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW ZIMBABWE

The introduction of worker participation was immediately confronted by and operated within an institutional framework characterized by a number of problems.

Firstly, there was a polarization between the races, between an exclusively Black group of workers and a predominantly White group of managers; relations between these two groups at Independence were ones of conflict and suspicion. Secondly, most companies had neither the experience nor the desire to introduce worker participation. Such experience and desire would have facilitated the introduction and development of worker participation and the democratization of decision-making. Thirdly, there was no legal framework within which worker participation was to take place: until the enactment of the Labour Relations Act at the end of 1985, the Ministry of Labour's *Guidelines* (Zimbabwe, n.d.) had no legal force. The non-existence of such a legal framework meant that the nature, content and implementation of worker participation in industry was left largely to the discretion of individual companies. Fourthly, state restrictions on the scope and range of decisions in which workers could participate had the effect of marginalizing the role of workers' committees. Although the state enunciated the policy of industrial democracy, the implementation guidelines it subsequently issued denied the workers' committees the right to participate in management decision-making and in the determination of their wages and conditions of service, the last two being left for determination between management and the trade unions. Fifthly and lastly, the existence of transnational corporations meant that

there was a real possibility that local management would be unable to control or even influence corporate policy on such determination, and that the nation-state might lack control over important sectors of its economy. The transfer of the effective centre of decision-making from the local subsidiary to the global corporation inevitably relegates the workers' committees to mere channels of communication. Over and above these problems, a number of other obstacles stood in the way of industrial democracy and the effective participation of the workers, the workers' committees and, indeed, the trade unions in matters that affected them. These factors include: the forms of ownership and control of capital; state involvement in labour issues; the quality of worker and management representatives on works' councils; the organization structures and their attendant forms and distribution of power within enterprises; and attitudes towards and interests (personal, political and otherwise) in worker participation.

In Zimbabwe rights of ownership and control are legally and institutionally firmly established and therefore, in part, form the framework within which workers' participation operates. Those who own, control, and those who control shape the events and determine in large measure the outcome. Suggestions and inputs from the workers' committees have tended to be accepted only to the extent that they make sound business sense and/or are of little negative consequence to the interests of the owners and the controllers of the companies. Workers' committees nationwide have had to live with this situation. Through their control, managements have to a large extent determined any political agenda(s) within their companies. Issues that the company does not want discussed are usually taken off the agenda or glossed over as managerial prerogatives. Where such issues are discussed, the interests of the owners and controllers generally prevail. For example, in the mining company studied, matters not included on the works council agenda were normally not discussed. This exclusion often infuriated and frustrated workers in general and the workers' representatives in particular. However, there was some evidence that not all cases omitted from the works' council agenda were totally ignored. Some of them were dealt with in other forums, sometimes to the satisfaction of the parties involved, including the workers' committee; and quite often their exclusion was temporary, pending the completion of investigations by management.

State intervention, in the form of legislated minimum wages or maximum salaries, has in part contributed to ineffectual worker participation in managerial decision-making. In some sectors the state set parameters within which salary increases were to be negotiated. Such parameters constituted limits to the nature and extent of both management decision-making and workers' participation in it, and hence limits to industrial democracy. Whether or not this state intervention favoured workers or

management is beside the point that neither employers nor workers' committees decided on these matters.

Just as worker participation was affected by relationships of ownership and control, and by the state, so it was also affected by the 'quality' of worker representatives. In most cases (excepting banks and other financial and commercial concerns, where the average level of education among workers was relatively high, generally at least 'O' level), the tendency among industrial workers was to choose illiterate and semi-literate workers to represent them (i.e. 'one of their own'). The disadvantage of workers electing 'their own' was that they were no match in the works councils for well-qualified and experienced management representatives, White or Black. The result was varying degrees of management domination over the workers' representatives, a domination born of their relative educational superiority.

Where relatively well-educated workers were elected to represent employees, no sooner did they start doing precisely that than they were promoted to positions that were regarded as supervisory and hence ineligible (in terms of the Ministry *Guidelines* and later the Labour Relations Act) to represent or be represented by the workers' committee. In most cases, such promotions were 'natural', not a ploy by managements to dilute worker representation. Once elected, worker representatives who had something to offer in the way of leadership were quickly seen and promoted. So rampant were these trends, though, that some workers began to see the office of workers' representative as a route to promotion, which stiffened the competition for these offices and sacrificed the goal of industrial democracy.

There is widespread evidence of the problems arising from illiteracy on the part of workers' representatives. I have documented one case (Maphosa, 1985, 54) in which, of a total of 40 on the workers' committee, 5 had had some secondary education, 20 had had a primary education, and 15 had had no formal schooling at all. Three of the 40 were semi-skilled and the other 37 unskilled workers. This relatively low level of literacy among the workers' representatives resulted in problems of communication and understanding between the workers' committee and management. In order to reduce this problem, management appointed a company official to act as interpreter in works council meetings. Even where the interpreter was able to convey messages accurately, problems still arose as a result of the failure of workers to understand the issues under discussion. For instance, in trying to explain why the company could not increase wages and salaries, management gave copies of the balance sheet to the workers' committee members, and talked about the effects of the world economic recession on the company. It is possible that this information may have been used as a weapon by management in dealing with poorly-educated

workers. Members of the workers' committee certainly complained that the information they had been given was both difficult to understand and inaccurate. They further argued that, even if the information was correct, workers were entitled to receive wages commensurate with their effort, irrespective of the company's financial position. Their position was: 'We may not understand what you are saying, but that makes no difference to us, we know what we want and are entitled to. If we were to understand your position fully, we may then be obliged to compromise.'

The meeting ended without agreement. Management accused the workers' representatives of greed and of making demands without any concern for the welfare of the company. The workers' committee, management alleged, had become a committee for demanding charity and handouts from management. These accusations and counter-accusations led to further conflicts between the committee and management, which in turn were further exacerbated by differences of opinion as to the objectives of worker participation and the 'unionization' and politicization of the workers' committee (for further details, see Maphosa, 1985).

Typical organization structures in most companies in Zimbabwe comprise tall hierarchies, with the Board and its Chairman at the top, followed by the managing director and usually two or three levels of management, then supervisors, and finally the workers. In these organizations, red tape and bureaucratic logic (i.e. the necessity to follow the chain of command in decision-making) severely inhibit effective worker participation in management decision-making. The bureaucratic structures of most companies accord very little authority to the workers' committee, which has thus remained peripheral, ineffective and ineffectual.

My research during 1981-2, while worker participation was still being introduced, indicated that, in terms of attitudes, the workers' desire for participation and influence was considerably higher than management's acceptance of such participation and was also higher than the government guidelines permitted. While management preferred marginal roles for and influence by the workers' committee, the workers wanted involvement in practically all management decisions. While most workers and workers' committees preferred to participate in management decision-making, particularly affecting salaries/wages and working conditions, management tended to want to limit worker participation to issues relating to the maintenance of discipline and ways and means of improving communication and mutual understanding between workers and management.

Given the different and sometimes conflicting views of the scope of participation desired, management control ensured that management interests prevailed and industrial peace was maintained on terms acceptable to, if not dictated by, them. This is not to suggest that open conflict prevailed in all companies, but where the issues of the form, scope and extent of

workers' committee involvement in management decision-making were amicably resolved without much fuss, it was generally because of the management's ability to balance the interests of their companies and their workers. The prior relationship between workers and management played a crucial role here: companies with previously amicable labour-management relations had the fewest problems.

WORKERS' COMMITTEES

Evidence from my study indicated that over 90 per cent of workers in the mining company used the services of the various workers' committees; they found these committees valuable in representing their interests. But an equal number of employees held the view that on personal issues (of salary/wage levels, job grading, promotion and discipline) personal representation via the supervisor-management communications channel was more effective than going to the workers' committee. They thus tended to seek representation from the committee on such issues as a last resort. Despite the fact that most committees took the line that their employers should not make any decisions affecting employees without their prior agreement, then, the workers' committees were generally seen as the last line of defence, not the first. The evidence also suggested that, where an employee had sought representation by his workers' committee on such an issue in the first instance, he had no confidence in his immediately-superior management.

Managements, on the other hand, tried to keep the workers' committees 'in their place', with no real authority or influence, and to use these committees merely to communicate matters of policy and propaganda and to disseminate confidence-building information. The general management line was that running the affairs of the company was a management duty, that management (not the workers' committee) was accountable for the company results, and that, therefore, while they were prepared to consult when they saw fit with their workers' committees, they alone would make the decisions. Through the workers' committees, managers were thus able to keep some (groups of) employees and the trade unions in check.

Workers' committees, particularly in small towns, mines and outposts, were used by politically-ambitious workers to develop political followings and to cultivate relationships and linkages with officials of the ruling party. Some of them thus rose to senior posts in their geographical areas within the cell, branch and district structure of the party, using their position as workers' representatives as a springboard.

Some workers also used the workers' committees as a stepping-stone to positions within the trade unions, and yet others took advantage of their positions in the committees to ingratiate themselves with management,

which sometimes resulted in their promotion up the work ranks. However, it is important to note that most members took advantage of the workers' committee platform to demonstrate their leadership capabilities, and on that score many earned their promotion legitimately, as I indicated earlier.

Although the situation varied from company to company, and there was a considerable range of views, the general view of both workers and management was that workers' committees have had moderate influence on management decisions. Some managers (particularly line managers) felt that the workers' committees had had too much influence (directly, or indirectly via personnel departments), particularly on matters of employee discipline, employee welfare and the distribution of benefits within the company. It was, however, not uncommon to find in any one company managers and supervisors complaining that the workers' committee had too much influence, while workers complained that the committee was not as effective and as influential as they felt it should have been.

For workers, real or perceived influence — or the lack of it — in the determination of wage and grade levels, constituted the main reason for dissatisfaction with worker participation in general and workers' committees in particular. The greater the extent to which a workers' committee was seen to bring about the desired outcomes, the more effective and influential it was seen to be and the more satisfied workers were, both with their particular committee and with the whole system of worker participation. Management's level of satisfaction with the system, however, rested on their perceptions of the workers' committees' co-operation in assisting in the control of workers, in facilitating communication and understanding and in making workers more productive. Managements generally thought that the levels of workers' committee influence and authority were already too high. Workers, in contrast, held the view that management monopolized decision-making and that the workers' committees should have more say in personnel policies, working conditions and the distribution system. Their desire for more say remained unsatisfied. They continued to want more, to lobby for more, and to want to be seen by their work-mates as doing more. So strong in some instances was this want, particularly where their performance related to the quest for re-election to office in the workers' committee or the party, that, as I have shown elsewhere (Maphosa, 1985), some workers' committee members even went back on written and signed agreements with their managements, at very high industrial-relations and production costs to their companies.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of worker participation in Zimbabwe during the period 1980–1990 in theory attempted to provide a new system of industrial decision-

making and constituted an opportunity for all interests to be represented in decision-making in the workplace. In practice, however, worker participation on the shop-floor in Zimbabwe had some weaknesses. The concept itself did not seem to be uniformly understood and accepted by wide sections of either management or workers. The differing expectations among workers and management of the nature, scope, level and range of decisions in which workers could and did participate were not fully reconciled. The result was essentially the perpetuation of the different companies' pre-Independence systems of decision-making within the nominal form, but with little of the substance, of effective worker influence and participation. The workers thus remained relatively powerless in the face of management control, despite state intervention ostensibly on their side.

Consequently, the role of the workers' committees, and indeed that of the trades unions in decision-making and the conduct of industrial relations, has remained marginal. Even though this result may not have been the long-term intention of government, its intervention has tended to inhibit the growth and development of both trade unions and workers' committees. This lack of growth and strength has further delayed the advent of industrial democracy. Where some measure of effective worker participation existed (which was the exception rather than the rule), it was because of the initiative of individual companies more than anything else.

The Zimbabwean variety of 'worker participation' therefore involved no genuine, even partial, worker control or influence. While this lack may well have been conducive to more harmonious industrial relations than existed in the colonial era, the question remains as to whether the role of the workers in this new harmony was decisive or marginal in terms of the formulation of policies and the making of company decisions.

One might argue that the dominant social, economic, legal and political forces in Zimbabwe in its first decade of Independence were not conducive to industrial democracy. Operating within a capitalist economy resulted in the Zimbabwean 'socialist' government coming to terms with the capitalist order. It worked with industrialists and financiers and apparently came to rely on the very establishment it used to mock. The power of the employers was thus little diluted. Within this socio-economic context, even without structural adjustment, in the foreseeable future the effectiveness of worker participation in bringing about industrial democracy is likely to remain marginal.

During the first ten years of post-Independence Zimbabwe, the government's flirtations with socialism seemed destined to overturn the country's capitalist institutions of ownership and control and its attendant labour relations system, but the basic fact is that nothing much actually changed. These years, then, seem but a temporary deviation, on the surface, from the norm of the settler colonial economy established in

1890. In the history of Zimbabwe, there has been a consistent promotion of economic development along capitalist lines and, not so much in words as in action, a consistent promotion of industrial harmony through industrial relations systems and laws that firmly support this development. Although the governments of the country have differed, and equally their labour laws, not only have all such laws served basically the same interest of economic development but all governments have also structured the law to suit their different electors. While aware that the 1985 Labour Relations Act demanded that they be seen to be more humane towards their workers, most employers were also keenly aware that their power and rights to run their companies' affairs in the ways they saw fit remained largely intact under this legislation. Most employers also realized that the introduction of more humane labour relations resulted in better industrial relations, if not also (often for extraneous reasons) higher productivity. Employees, including workers, also saw benefits from their increased participation (albeit in peripheral decisions) as a result of state intervention.

On balance, therefore, and despite the teething problems (some of which remain unresolved), Zimbabwe's experimentation with industrial democracy has held benefits for all involved. The principle of 'give and take' between workers and management, and between both and the state, has been firmly established and, to all parties concerned, that seems to be more important than the academic issues of whether or not industrial democracy exists and whether or not Zimbabwe is 'socialist' in outlook or in deed. The common concern on the part of the state, employers and workers' representatives lies in continued economic development and the creation of wealth and employment within effective minimum standards of pay, environmental and other working conditions, safety conditions and retirement provisions: a thoroughly social democratic agenda!