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WORKER'S REPRESENTATIVES

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*The struggle for effective and meaningful workers'  
participation in a ship repairing industry: an  
appraisal and some policy options*

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## I. PURPOSE AND METHOD OF RESEARCH

The development of workers' participation in Malta has been accompanied by research ever since it started in 1971. It has been possible to advance the development of actual participatory structures on the basis of systematic and in-depth evaluation. Especially since the establishment of the Workers' Participation Development Centre a regular feedback from those who live the actual participation experience to the researchers of the Centre, was obtained. In that framework of interaction between research and practice some major research studies were undertaken. The most important of these was the survey of opinions of workers in the Malta Drydocks. The main conclusion of this study was the wide acceptance of participation by the workers. At the same time the study showed that at the level of grass root representation of workers the existence of worker-elected Works Committee (KTX) side by side with worker-elected shop stewards in a trade union structure cause confusion and misunderstanding. Through the KTX and the shop stewards two labour relations systems are simultaneously at work.

The first is the system of participation, with the KTX as the typical exponent of the new pattern, institutionally integrated in the workers' self-management structure of the Drydocks. The ever more frequent and intense contacts between the KTX and the Drydocks Council, in an active liaison-policy, show the progressive institutional integration.

The second system of labour relations is that of opposition, with the shop steward as the typical exponent of grass root representation within a trade union structure in a yet deeply engrained and socially widely accepted workers' culture of opposition to management.

The problems of co-existence of KTX and shop stewards was not only revealed by the survey. The shop stewards and the General Workers' Union had already discussed these problems at several meetings and conferences, and a study group had come into existence to formulate proposals for solutions. The survey results could not provide enough information on which to base such solutions since it concentrated on the opinions of workers. What appeared an important subsequent research step, was to analyze more closely the attitudes and behaviour of the KTX members and of the shop stewards.

The research reported here is a study of the problems of the KTX members and the shop stewards. The main aim of the study was to assess the problems of KTX-shop steward relations, in the framework of the self-management system of the Drydocks, and to formulate possible venues for solving the problems. It was decided to interview all KTXs and all shop stewards. Besides, it was also decided to interview other persons who hold key positions in the decision making structure of the Drydocks.

The research method used was that of group interviews. Group interviews allow an in-depth explanation of the problems as these are faced by existing groups and as the solution of problems is a group endeavour. The group dynamics at work when actual meetings take place (leadership, articulation, consent, protest, etc. etc.) reproduce themselves in a group interview. Thus, the opinions and attitudes of some more influential individuals gain more weight than those of the more silent members. The group method was chosen since it is assumed that in the actual process of change

these dynamics play an important role. In the case of the shop stewards, groups of stewards who are functionally related were interviewed.

16 out of 17 KTXs were interviewed: 52 out of 76 KTX members took part. One KTX refused to be interviewed. Not all KTX members turned up for the group interview for reasons of leave, "time in lieu", shift work, etc. Seven group interviews were conducted with 36 out of the 46 shop stewards.

The group interviews were briefly opened by the researchers who asked the groups to discuss their achievements and problems. Whereas it was ensured that certain major issues were discussed much emphasis was laid on hearing the spontaneous reactions of the groups, who often went into hot debates amongst themselves, corrected and reminded each other etc. The group interviews lasted between 1hr.15min. and 2 hours, just over one and half hours on average. The interviews with the KTXs were held in the Administrative Building of the Drydocks, a place well known to them as a neutral site. The appointments and arrangements were made by the secretary of the Drydocks Council whereby involvement of management could be avoided. The interviews with the shop stewards were held in the Education Centre of the Drydocks (the most neutral place) and the arrangements for the interviews were made by the section secretary of the General Workers' Union.

Four more group interviews were held. One with all the members of the Drydocks Council, one with all the members of the Executive Committee of the Metal Workers' Section (Drydocks) of the GWU, one with ten departmental and divisional managers and one with the general manager and his deputy. These four interviews were held so as to enable one to 'place' the problems of the KTX and shop stewards in the total framework of decision making. the

present study does not pretend to have analysed the entire participation system of the Drydocks: the emphasis was meant to be placed and actually was placed on the relation KTX-shop steward.

The structure of the present report is simple. Following this introduction, a sketch of the KTX will be presented in part II; in part III of the shop steward; in part IV of the managers, the Trade Union Executive and the Drydocks Council. Care has been taken to reflect the cordial though somewhat confused atmosphere of the interviews. This way, the reader may better appreciate the life feelings of those who struggle to make participation function. Part V presents a summary analysis and Part VI ventures policy recommendations. It is expected that the reader draws his/her own conclusions and considers his/her own policy options. I have also offered mine.

## II. THE KTX: PROGRESSIVE FRUSTRATION IN PARTICIPATION

Together with the KTXs we first established factual information on the functioning of the committees. The following summary provides the basic information. KTX meetings are mostly conducted on the initiative of the KTX members who also decide the agenda; only a few KTX meetings are always attended by management. In most of these management attendance is strictly by invitation. There are KTXs meetings which are never attended by management, even if invited. Some KTXs invite shop stewards for certain issues; others always meet without shop stewards.

Minutes of KTX meetings are kept and these are circulated by the secretary of the Drydocks Council to those concerned. Several KTXs send follow-up letters to management to inform them of the advice or proposals resulting from their meetings. The initiative and follow-up of KTX business is thus in the hands of its worker elected members. It sometimes happens that management requests a KTX meeting if it wants to discuss a specific issue.

During the group interviews the KTXs were asked to mention issues discussed by them during the past six months. We have classified the issues mentioned as follows: general matters, production matters, organisation matters, personnel management matters and welfare matters. The listing reads as follows:

### General matters

Budget of the department

### Production matters

storing of goods  
purchase, placement and use of machines

data processing  
use of compressors, gear cutters  
the process of sand blasting  
savings in production costs

Organisation matters

all questions of overtime  
allocation of work to individuals and groups  
composition of and arrangements for back up forces  
choice of people for overtime, travelling  
parties, shifts, etc.  
time keeping  
productivity  
lay-out of workshop  
use of company telephone

Personnel management matters

bonus  
leave and sick leave  
transfer or workers  
replacement of a retired chargeman  
protective clothing

Welfare matters

safety and welfare  
canteen  
toilets

This listing should be seen as indicative rather than as exhaustive. In some cases KTX members had brought along agendas and minutes of some meetings, in other cases members checked their memory when enumerating matters they discussed. The listing shows that the KTXs cover a wide range of decision making at the department level where they operated.



"Sorry Committees"

How do the KTXs function? Some KTXs report that they are satisfied with some achievements but mention that these are exception rather than rule. Only one KTX reports a continuing positive experience:

"Management wants the committee to function. We know what is needed for our work, and management knows that. We sometimes get together with management to buy new machines...we are functioning very well. We are always around and know what the workers need. Together with management we check the progress of the boats we build. We discuss all sorts of problems related to production, also overtime, assignment of work to individuals and groups, arrangements for shiftwork, etc. We represent 150 workers. Often, the liaison Council member attends our meetings ...."

Some KTXs give their work the benefit of the doubt and state that they realize they cannot yet achieve much since a lot has to be learned. Especially, they say, they have little influence on complicated management issues: "you feel you don't have the right to comment on a lot of things because you don't have the competence". KTX members find it important to discuss the budget but find it a difficult task. "If involved more and more in its discussion one would learn how to discuss a budget, and how to play a role in its making and adoption as a representative of workers".

But the overwhelming response of the KTX members was one of deep frustration. They report that they have time and again tried to convince management of the benefits resulting from the changes proposed in the organisation of work, but management rejects any proposal or advice, often

without giving reasons. The KTX members find that on a number of issues they are ideally placed to judge since they are familiar with a number of organisational problems inside out. Also, they find out that when they meet over certain issues, management has already taken a decision. Or, and this is much regretted, management seeks the help of the KTX only on "hot" issues and then expects the KTX to take responsibility and sell unpopular decisions to the workers. But the KTXs want to be involved on all issues and on a continuing basis.

One KTX had started to refer to itself as the "sorry committee", for the lack of follow-up, interest and respect on the part of management. Any advice would meet with "sorry we cannot implement it", or later "sorry we forgot". Three other KTXs had come to the conclusion that it was better to resign, since management had never accepted a proposal.

#### Preparation for KTX Work

The KTX members report that they are not equipped well enough to function adequately. They have yet to find out their role to play. During the first session after being elected, a member of the Council or the outgoing KTX members introduce the new members to their terms of reference and to the KTX statutes. Emphasis is placed on the production side of their role: to make sure that the company be run smoothly, to cooperate with management, to produce safely, quickly and as cheaply as possible, etc.

KTX members found themselves too polite and too shy when confronted with management. One of the more successful KTXs appeared to be articulate, active and aggressive and ready to try out any channel they could find to

implement certain measures. They also observed that other KTXs were not operating as they themselves did and advised that KTX members "should not knock on the door of management but rush in and stamp on the floor".

Conspicuous among KTX members is the lack of education for their KTX function. Only two of the KTX members interviewed had received some training or education (as shop stewards in the context of a trade union education programme). One specific educational effort mentioned was a course on accounting and other management matters which started at the initiative of the Council. But the level was found too high by those who had attended the lectures and they were discontinued. All KTX members stated they wanted more education, were eager to know more about their own role, function, about how they could proceed and about workers participation in general.

#### The Role of the KTX and Trade Union Matters

In the work of the KTX its members find out that their most immediate skill is the representation of the interests of the workers. They start to contribute to decision making with a specifically favourable attitude to the problems of the workers. They develop in their role as KTX members according to the circumstances or opportunities which prevail around their specific KTX.

When enumerating the sort of matters in which the KTXs involve themselves (see listing on pages 4 and 5) it became clear that many of these are 'traditional' trade union matters. The KTX is quite aware of this.

In some of the KTXs traditional trade union matters are painstakingly referred to the shop steward. The members state that they refuse to handle

individual grievances, issues of pay and similar issues, and send the workers to the union. When some other KTXs feel that such traditional trade union matters are at stake, they invite shop stewards to their meeting.

But the KTXs get involved in union matters, also in the KTXs where care is taken not to. It is the workers they represent who bring the KTX members into the trade union terrain. When workers request the help of KTX members, these find they cannot refuse. Especially in cases where the shop steward has not been able to get something done, the KTX is prepared to help. Sometimes problems can be solved by putting them in another framework.

"It should not be forgotten that the workers have, through the KTX, a more trustworthy access to management. This happens as the KTX looks at both company and worker interest and the shop steward only at the latter. This trust basis makes the KTX members better representatives.

If workers feel treated unjustly with respect to overtime they ask us to intervene because thus they expect to get at least an explanation from management. Well....we do it because the workers ask us, but we know we are going in the place of the shop steward and it is not right"....

The KTX members work among the workers they represent and it is difficult to refuse to defend them, "even when their demands are not entirely in the interest of the company". And if the workers find the KTX stronger on a certain issue they will go to them. If they find the shop steward stronger they go to him. "They are the judges".

According to the KTX members, the workers do not know the 'official' competence of the KTX. In the opinion of the KTX members the workers judge the KTX performance in terms of the benefits they can derive from it and are apt to use the KTX primarily to get overtime work. There is little interest on the part of the workers for the production oriented role of the KTX. Workers would, for instance, seldom read the minutes of the KTX on the notice boards. Sometimes the KTX is suspected of siding with management. In one case a KTX was accused of reporting certain workers to management.

But the problem is much more complicated than the one of separating trade union and KTX business. The KTX and the shop steward get into conflict very often since they discuss the same question from a different perspective. Questions like discipline, overtime, the composition of a travelling party, flexibility, back-up forces, task assignments, transfers, etc. are, in the opinion of the KTX members, judged by the shop stewards in terms of income and traditional trade rights of workers, irrespective of the interests of the company. Whereas they, as KTX members, take both interests into account. The KTX members gave plenty of examples where a balance has to be struck between the interest of the worker and the interest of the company. The KTX members find that the union continues too much to defend the workers' interest unilaterally.

#### Stereo-typed Image of Shop Steward

The members of the KTX appeared to have formed a rather stereo-typed image of the shop steward. In their opinion shop stewards are people who do not care about production. They represent the workers without carrying any

responsibility for the good of the company. Also, according to KTX members: shop stewards "defend people who are in the wrong", "they represent injustice", "they defend individual grievances with which they themselves do not agree", "they are under pressure of the workers to represent their rights at all cost".

Only rarely did KTX members mention that the shop stewards had changed their behaviour or attitude. At the same time there is a much more widespread feeling among KTX members that the trade union at company level (level of the section secretary) has changed much and looks consistently at the interests of both worker and company..."the trade union has become much more responsible".

#### KTX - Council Relations

The KTX members appreciate the role of the Drydocks Council, and state that a lot of progress was made in this respect over the past few years..."they seem to care about the KTX". Council members assist KTXs if requested. The creation of 'liaison members' on the Council is particularly appreciated by the KTXs. There appears to be an increasing continuity in relations between Council and KTX.

In certain cases these contacts yield concrete results. A case was mentioned where a KTX found its advice to management negated. They thereupon mobilised all workers who signed a petition to continue a certain back-up force. This petition was passed on to the Council which imposed the decision on management.

A more permanent intervention of the Council in response to complaints of KTXs was to secure a flow of information. KTXs often complained in the past that they did not obtain the necessary information which enables them to involve themselves meaningfully in decision making. This was because management had refused to share (all) information with them. The Council instructed management to pass relevant information to the committees. This instruction was often ignored. The Council then instructed its secretary to monitor all management information (memoranda, mail, etc.) and to pass on any relevant information to the KTXs. This move was hailed by the Council as one of the examples of how it could reassert its power in order to help the KTX to function.

It is appreciated by the KTX members that the Council cannot always help...."if you see how many problems we have at our level....they must be very busy too"....

The KTXs are not satisfied in every respect with the Council. They say that sometimes they do not know whether a certain decision originates from management or from the Council. The management says 'because the Council wants it' and the Council says 'it is a management decision". One KTX was very critical: "sometimes the Council forces us to dance for the workers".

#### "Management is the Bottleneck"

According to the statutes of the KTX the final decision making power remains with management. Many KTX members would like to see more power for themselves. But first of all they want to make better use of their present

advisory capacity. They see management behaviour and management attitude as the paramount obstacle.

During all the interviews with KTX members a positive remark about management marked a rare occasion. In only one KTX the members stated that the departmental manager refrained from taking decisions affecting workers before consulting them. The overall negative experience of the KTXs was, however, associated with management. Members of the KTX often sighed "management is the bottleneck". For participation to function "we all have to change: but so far only the KTX has changed, management has not". A sad anthology reads as follows:

"management ignores us, they still think they are the bosses at the Drydocks...they do not want to be exposed by the workers...they always think that their ideas are better than those of the workers...the divisional managers suffer from superiority complexes...when we do not agree they get angry, they think we are there to help them and to agree with them...they cannot accept that sometimes we have better ideas...if you ask why, how, who...they feel offended, strained, disturbed, they make you feel that you enter a territory entirely theirs, they see us as obstructions...they do not want to see any workman with this dirty clothes in their office...they outsmart us and do not treat us at equal level...they keep the information to themselves..."

In brief, both in attitude and behaviour management stands in the way of a better functioning of the KTX, according to the KTX members. Many KTX



members would like to receive education but they feel that management needs it more: "the majority of them need it very badly".

"Whoever invented the KTX should get a gold medal"

The KTX members, without exception, were adamant that participation should stay. With much determination they listed the many advantages and positive points of workers' participation. "We are not working for someone else", "we elect our own leader", "we can express our views as we wish" or, "Now I can get information if I want, I can make proposals if I feel I should. I know that things can go better at the Drydocks because of the involvement of the workers and I know that the workers benefit from it".

One of the KTX members was so enthusiastic when talking of workers' participation that he concluded his listing of positive things with: "whoever invented the KTX should get a gold medal". Many stated that not only they as KTX members, but also the workers were in favour of participation despite its many problems: "nobody will be able to take it away from us"...

At the same time the KTX members found there was much room for improvement. The most often expressed claim (no surprise after all that had been said by the KTX members about their experience) was an increase of the powers of the KTX. Specifically, it was argued, the KTX should get a legal basis, like the Drydocks Council had already. Management should be forced to accept the power of the KTX. The attitude of workers should be changed so that they would better understand and accept the role of the KTX. And

several KTX members stated that the KTX should be for the benefit of the workers, irrespective of political parties.

One of the KTX members said he would go as far as to write to the Minister of Development seeking help to improve the powers of the KTX. Its members seek to have an equal say. They feel that the statutes have to change, giving more power to the KTX. This power should enable the KTX members to be involved in the decision making process from the beginning. Legal provisions should specify the procedures in joint decision making processes and regulate the precise rights of KTX members in these processes. When talking of the improvement of the functioning of participation, the KTX members were all the time, again pointing at the attitude and behaviour of management. Management should accept more the ideas brought forward by KTX members, and should contribute by using simpler language. Education for management is needed which may help them to understand, accept and respect participatory decision making.

The KTX members also demanded education for themselves. They want to be educated so as to be competent enough to participate with management on equal terms. But such education would make little sense according to the KTX members if it was given only to them. Management should also be exposed to education, and possibly the two (management and KTX members) should get education in joint sessions so as to learn how to go about participatory decision making.

### III. THE SHOP STEWARD: PROGRESSIVE EROSION OF FUNCTIONS

#### "A Ball pushed up and down between KTX and Management"

The shop stewards in the Drydocks appear to be puzzled persons. Ever since the existence of the KTXs they have at various trade union gatherings and conferences asked clarification on their own position. They have proposed changes of the role of the KTX and of their own in relation to the KTX. During the interviews with shop stewards it appeared to be pretty difficult to unravel the many knots of the complicated existence of the shop stewards.

The core of the shop stewards' problem is that their position now yields less status than used to be the case when they were the sole representatives of the workers.

Two out of many concrete examples given by shop stewards may illustrate their problems. In a department a fan was needed. The shop steward on behalf of the workers asks management to provide fans for workers working in the heat. Management says there is no money for fans. Management puts the question also before the KTX, who concluded that no money for fans is available. The shop steward is not satisfied: fans can be made in one of the workshops of the Drydocks. Besides, other things are bought for the department which which are much less necessary. But the decision remains unchanged: no fans. In the old times the union would fight this out. The KTX does not and nothing can now be done.

For the composition of travelling parties management had made a pool of experienced people. The shop steward wanted to give also new people a

chance to be included and to gain experience eventually. But the shop steward found out that KTX, the Drydocks Council and the Section Secretary had already been involved in the manager's decision. He felt that, as a shop steward, he would have little chance to revert a decision already taken.

Before participation was introduced, according to some shop stewards, one would get a fair hearing from management. But now the KTX gets a fair hearing since it is protected by the Council, and the management depends on the Council. If approached by the shop steward, management hides behind the KTX and the Council. According to some shop stewards management is instructed by the Council to pay more heed to the KTX than to shop stewards. Needless to say that under such circumstances workers find it more practical to turn to the KTX if they need something.

The shop stewards are pessimistic about their own position. "We are sort of a ball that is pushed up and down between KTX and management. Our claims are shelved, we receive blows from all sides, management is against us and the KTX has stolen our work. Even if we want to fight we cannot. The KTX is chopping our head"...

#### Lost in the network of participation

Notwithstanding the awareness of the positive side of the new situation, and the preparedness to play a new role, the shop stewards on the whole give the impression of being often at a loss as to where they stand and where to go. They are neither here nor there.

"Previously we fought with management but now we have to be much more careful because management has links with KTX and Council. You don't know exactly where to tackle management because they use KTX and Council as a shield"... "Who has the real power? If we confront management they say go to the Council, who says go to the union...we don't know where the power lies"... "Where to go with my case?... "The workers do not believe the shop stewards any more and they say: where is the trade union?"....

Many shop stewards feel that they are thrown into a network of KTX, Council and management and that participation has shut the door for the trade union. Also those shop stewards who are much in favour of participation ask themselves how to continue as a shop steward. They observe that many things are decided at higher trade union level. They all talk of the increasing power of the KTX, and they see the Council is making great efforts to support the KTX. Several said they felt powerless as shop stewards.

#### KTX - Shop Steward Conflicts

No problems need arise if a common front is made between KTX and shop stewards. In one department if an issue arises, first a settlement between KTX and shop stewards is sought before bringing the matter to management. They feel they have a lot of power together. In another department there is constant KTX - shop steward consultation and a lot is achieved. In some cases meetings take place between management, shop stewards and KTX to try and find solutions together.

Striking is not the cooperation among the two types of worker representatives, but a tug-of-war between them. Shop stewards report they are 'allowed' to consult KTX from time to time. But these find that KTX is using the information the stewards may bring to solve problems as KTX. "By consulting the KTX you finish your own role". Some stewards have become wary of advising KTX members.

Of course there are cases where KTX and shop stewards each have their role to play and their standards may be very different. It may be necessary for a crane driver to work after 9pm, and the KTX is supposed to defend this since it is good for production. But the shop steward may be against this: the crane driver may find working at night too dangerous, does he get extra pay or not? and so on. Or, a working party is to be formed. The best people are between 30 and 40 years of age and KTX should choose these. But the shop steward would give everybody a chance for overtime or for a travelling party.

"Eight overalls were provided, the workers wanted them but with pockets. As they were, they had no pockets. The shop steward went after that. He contacted management. But found out management had already discussed it with the KTX. These had already found a solution. So the shop steward was ridiculed by the workers since he went out to confront management just to find out that a solution had already been found through the KTX."

This opinion of the shop stewards is a clear example of how the KTX is snatching welfare matters from the shop steward. Several shop stewards reported that whereas they should fight for overtime for the workers and the

KTX should fight for the reduction of overtime (production cost saving!), they found out that the KTX started to keep lists of the distribution of overtime so as to assure a fair distribution of overtime to workers...a shop steward matter. But the KTXs know it is an important matter for the workers and they want to get the credit.

"First the KTX played their role of caring about the production of the company, but over time they started to absorb more and more trade union functions....now they are grabbing everything..."

Resented even more is the resulting 'dustbin function' of the shop steward. If a worker comes with a claim that is difficult to defend, the KTX will send the worker on to the shop steward. They do not say: you are wrong, but they say: go to the union. The KTX does not mind to involve itself in claims if they see they can get the honour, but the 'hot' issues are referred to the union, according to the shop stewards.

A shop steward can contact the KTX, but KTX members take the decision among themselves. The power of the shop steward is thus passed on to the KTX but the power is not shared. And the shop steward cannot undo the decision of a KTX because in its experience the KTX is in a much better position to get something done: it can directly contact the Council. If a shop steward wants something done, he has to go to management. Management will contact the section secretary of the union. It will come back to management, then up to top management and finally to the Council. The KTX members go straight to the Council.

### Friction with the KTX

No wonder there is a great deal of friction between the stewards and the KTX. But for a few exceptions the shop stewards have a negative image of the KTX members elected by the workers. Sometimes the verdict is indeed very harsh: "people try to get on the KTX to help themselves", "you hear about them once a year, around elections", "they are not the right people", or worse, "they are second rate people", or even vindictively by "They are popular because they are lazy and therefore have plenty of time to lobby". The shop stewards also accuse the KTX of collaboration with management. As one of them said: "I would expect management to take the role of management but I would not expect the KTX to take that role: as representatives of workers they should take the interests of workers into account"...

### Workers and Managers

According to the shop stewards the workers do not really care about participation: they are "just interested in what they can take home". Their main preoccupation is still overtime work. They expected participation to provide more overtime. They now see participation as a method to make people sacrifice. The workers expect the stewards to fight and they don't see them doing so. The workers say that the stewards have become too timid with management. The workers always expect the stewards to back them up. "In the new situation they find we don't. They do not trust us, as a result. Whereas in the old days the rights of the workers was trade union business, now the duties of the workers have become trade union business - that is how the workers look at us". A most striking feature of our talks



with shop stewards is that they seldom talked of management. Whenever the relation between the KTX and management was discussed the shop stewards stated that KTX had too much power over management. For them this is a humiliation of management for management should have the freedom to decide.

And what about the trade union?

The shop stewards are quite aware that much has changed in the structure of the Drydocks. According to many of them the trade union should accept the implications that now the workers are earning their own pay and have become responsible for the running of the Yard. Before, the union was "covering the sins of the workers", but now their role is to show the workers that they have to change. The union can no longer just automatically side with the worker, who now works in a different context. Especially under the present circumstances where the Drydocks is fighting for survival, the union has to play a different role. What role? The general idea of a co-operative role of the union is easily understood, but in day-to-day interaction not so easily put into practice - according to the shop stewards. "We are in a mixed grill" says one of them, "there are too many representatives of workers and all have different views of participation". The shop stewards feel especially troubled. Whenever they are after the "big things" (fighting out rights of workers) they have to contact the section secretary. But at that level the trade union is heavily involved in top level decision making. "When we come with a complaint, a proposal, a request, everything appears to have been decided already with management, or with the Council, or with both. And if then you want to

pursue something you feel you cannot contradict what has already been decided democratically. "To state it bluntly, if you want to get something done as a shop steward you first have to fight it out with the section secretary. As a shop steward you have to fight all by yourself, there is no backbone to fall back upon". The stewards say that if they come with an issue they are told to keep quiet. Industrial action is not supported by the union. The policy is to solve all problems through the Council and the KTXs, and this policy gets full support of the union section secretariat.

A number of shop stewards expressed grave concern in this respect. They warned that the trade union may lose its standing. The union has achieved much under the participation system, but it has not achieved it through fighting.

Another group argued that although perhaps the trade union behaviour had been less militant, a lot had been achieved. The workers are now better off than before. There is a guaranteed weekly wage, there is a wage policy which has narrowed income differences, etc. These shop stewards emphasize that many of these present day achievements now would have taken months of strikes before. The good cooperation between union and government is reflected in the national budget. In the Drydocks it is reflected in cooperation at the highest decision making level.

Apparently the question is: to what extent has the change of trade union approach changed the role of the shop steward? If the role of the trade union is different, should also the role of the shop steward change?

The shop steward in a new context

The majority of the shop stewards, however, react differently to the new situation. And here one can easily be misled. The majority of the stewards make nostalgic remarks about the time they were the only representatives of the workers and they took management to task. At the same time, however, they appear to realize that participation has landed them in a different situation with a lot of (new) values and where the shop stewards must find a new place for themselves in a new structure and to adopt a new attitude. They particularly underlined the fact that the shop stewards should now realize that the interest of the worker and the interest of the company are closely related, and that the good of the company is the good of the worker.

"The union used to be very high-handed but today it cannot be because the Yard is ours. The union has to watch that all the workers remain employed. The attitude has to be softer than in the old times, we cannot support claims which cannot be met. In the time of the Admiralty it was simple, we could make the Queen of England pay for our claims, today that is no longer possible"....  
...."as a shop steward we used to fight a private owner who was out to make profits...now, for wage increases and wage relativities, we turn to the Council elected by the workers themselves...our role has changed because the owner has changed, now the workers are the owners. And the trade union is now fighting for the rights of the workers. Not against someone, but in the framework of worker ownership. Naturally, our role is different than before"...

..."We now know the situation of the Drydocks we did not know before...even if the KTXs would be scrapped, we would not play our shop steward role as before, we would take the condition of the company into account..."

Many shop stewards hailed the policy of the Drydocks Council to create a more direct link between income and reward, to promote flexibility, and in general, to use the workforce in the best interest of the company. Thereby old trade union standards of inflexibility, grades, relativities, overtime, etc. lose much of their meaning. But many workers, in the experience of the shop stewards, still expect the union to represent these old standards, and so the union has to find solutions as how to operate in the new situation. For instance, how now to promote flexibility and to convince the workers of it.

There was a lot of awareness among the shop stewards about the necessity to play a new role under new circumstances. The main question among them was: what role? They were clearly seeking guidance.

#### Shop Steward business

None of the shop stewards would say that in the new (participatory) structure there was no place for them. One of them said that under the present participatory structure the shop steward has to be more alert than ever. The present averse economic situation might easily be abused as an excuse to exploit the worker. The shop steward, whilst cooperating for survival, should safeguard the basic rights of the worker. A major job remains to represent individual cases. If an individual worker is penalized

for poor performance, who defends him?" In the opinion of the stewards, neither the KTX nor the Council. Such individual claims may pertain to other matters as well: just distribution of overtime, or allowances like danger money. Shop stewards gave examples showing how they had been defending individual workers who would not otherwise find support. And even if flexibility and productivity are good for the company and therefore good for the worker, the shop steward should remain vigilant...

"The union sometimes has to defend a worker who does not want to work in another department even if flexibility demands the transfer. One has to try to the last drop to help a worker if possible. There was a case of a worker who had worked for over twenty years in a department, he had his friends and mastered all the little problems of the job. For him any transfer was emotionally very difficult. In the end a solution was found and the worker could stay. This is a case where the shop steward can play a role to find solutions for problems created by policies adopted by KTX and Council, whilst supporting these policies in general".

"Another example. Normally, when a ship leaves, the dock is cleaned before another ship is admitted. But sometimes management wants to dock another ship immediately. The KTX may agree, since it is in the interest of production. Here the role of the shop steward becomes important. He has to see whether there is a genuine case of haste. For instance, the steward may have to find out whether the docking of the new ship had been scheduled or

whether some time in between can be allowed to clean the dock which is safer and more pleasant for the workers"...

When confronted with the statement made by many KTX members saying that KTXs look at the interest of the company and the interest of the workers whereas the shop stewards look at the interests of the workers irrespective of the interests of the company, the shop stewards get very excited. They often reacted angrily. They claimed to be very conscious of the interest of the company and that it is their duty to look at the interest of both as much as anyone else.

#### Down with Participation?

Despite hosts of criticism and many sour remarks concerning their own position, the shop stewards did not advocate a return to the traditional trade union situation by abandoning workers' participation. To the contrary, some shop stewards declared that if there had not been participation and if the Yard had been run by a private owner, the Drydocks would have probably closed down like so many other shipyards in other parts of the world, and the workers would be on the streets today. Under conditions of participation a recovery from the problems of the Drydocks could be sought, through measures adopted by the workers themselves. For the workers, participation means survival. But many problems arise in the functioning of participation and these problems have to be solved.

Down with the KTX?

When talking of changes to be made in the practice of workers participation the stewards fired their criticism most of all on the KTX. No one said they should continue as they are....A few found it better to scrap the KTX. They had not done the job they had been created for and there was no hope, so they felt. Others pleaded that the power of the KTX be contained. In other words, the Council should not continue to expand the powers of the KTX. "The KTX should keep it in their mind that they are management side, that they are there to help management, and they should not do the stewards' job. This should be once more explained to them. And they should in no way look at the welfare of the workers. That was the job of a shop steward".

According to most shop stewards the KTXs should restrict their role to production. Let them discuss with management a plan for reorganisation, or whether a certain machine is useful for production. Thereafter the shop steward can make sure that the right person will work on that machine, with the right remuneration. Some shop stewards praised the KTXs for having achieved certain things in such a perspective. The shop stewards admitted that the KTX had achieved a number of things, and are often able to help the workers effectively. But in their zeal they start to absorb more and more shop steward functions.

KTX-shop steward cooperation

Primarily important in future will be that KTX and shop stewards work together. Among themselves they should sort out matters before going to

management. This has not happened enough in the past. It is important to amend the statutes of KTX and to allow shop stewards to be present in KTX meetings. And on KTX meetings the shop steward should share power. The shop steward should be an ex-officio member of the KTX, as already proposed and adopted at the Conference of the General Workers Union.

Not all shop stewards agreed that the steward should be an ex-officio KTX member. One of them said that if a shop steward wanted to sit on the KTX he should stand for election. If elected, he will know that he is there because the workers want him there.

Also the trade union should maintain closer contact with the shop stewards. In the feeling of some of them contacts within the union decreased since participation was introduced. The union should also, it was stated, explain to the workers the achievements made under the present system, since the workers are not aware of these. Thus the workers would better appreciate the role of the shop stewards as well. Speeches reported in newspapers are not sufficient. The union should seek to explain more effectively.

Education, education, education....

Also the shop stewards repeated many times that education was badly needed. The shop stewards, union officials, managers, KTX members etc. have to be trained in the new situation at the Drydocks. So many things are different, so many questions arise. "There is only one answer: education, education, education"....



#### IV. OPINIONS OF MANAGEMENT, TRADE UNIONS, AND DRYDOCKS COUNCIL

##### Management

The members of the KTX had great problems with the attitude and behaviour of management, which they depicted as the major obstacle for the well functioning of participation at KTX level. A meeting with a sample of 10 departmental and divisional managers was arranged, as well as a meeting with the general manager and the deputy general manager. These two 'hearings' together could provide a global picture of management's point of view.

None of these praised the KTX. Negative feelings were strongly expressed by some: "the KTX is fruitless and useless", "it is a burden, it is forced on us". The main complaint expressed was that KTXs deal with claims of workers and not with production. They are active, according to management, in achieving welfare, allowances, overtime etc. which brings them in a situation of a cold war with the shop stewards. Since management finds that the KTX does not deal with production they consider the KTX members "irresponsible". Many other labels were attached to the KTX members: "not the most broad-minded people", "only vote catchers", "too militant people", "they are not working themselves", etc.

Managers find that the behaviour of the KTX members has resulted in a loss of respect for management.

"Before the KTXs existed management was respected by the workmen. Now people look at management as just other workers or as just a tool. The KTX has increased antagonisms".

Top management was well aware of the nature of the KTX-management relations. The general manager stated "it is a vicious circle. Management is afraid the KTXs are after their power, that is why they do not like the KTX members. The KTX members feel management refuses to share any power, that is why they do not like management".

Management attitude to the KTX is quite different from its attitude to the Drydocks Council. The managers accept the principle that all the members of the enterprise elect the highest authority in the company to make its policy and that thereupon it becomes managements' task to execute that policy. Nevertheless, even if the principle is accepted, there is concern among the managers and top management that in their opinion the Council members are not always the best people in terms of education, attitude, skill, etc. What the managers see as a major challenge for the present Drydocks structure is to get a Council with competent people. The problem according to the managers is the structure 'below them'. The workers find it difficult to decide whether to go to the KTX or to the union. They will go, also in the experience of management, to where they expect the best result. As far as management is concerned, they would like the worker to go to the union. Management finds the union "more reasonable and responsible" and the shop stewards "have changed a lot and have become very responsible...that is because the union has also changed". But in the opinion of the managers the relationship between workers and union has been upset by the KTX, which is taking on the role of the union.

The stand of management may be summed up by saying that management is in general in favour of participation, but would like to see its structure

changed. They observe that participation has brought industrial peace to the Drydocks which for many, many years had not existed. "But we had to pay a high price: the KTX".

Once more: for the management the problem does not lie in the Council. The management implements the policy of the Council and this is accepted. It is the position of the KTX that is at stake. The KTXs often meet in the absence of the manager who is responsible. Before participation management had the authority of decision making and the responsibility. Now it only has the responsibility. Such responsibility without powers to make decisions cannot be accepted. Management is sometimes instructed by a KTX which has the backing of the Council. If management opposes, the Council will side with the KTX. This eventually leads to managerial indecision "managers seem to reason today: why should I take a decision if tomorrow another body will take the opposite decision?"

In the view of the managers it would be healthier if there was just the Council. Workers would know they are represented at the highest level and are not going to be taken for a ride. That should be enough. The KTX could be scrapped: Work is discipline, regulation, organisation. If you want to run an enterprise, you need people with knowledge and education, and that is what managers are. The KTX members are not and they should not interfere", "There can only be one captain on a ship". Even if a worker is the best fitter "he cannot do the job of management".

Only on very specific conditions could a KTX be tolerated, according to the managers, and that is if the KTX would perform a purely advisory role to management. In the early structure of the KTX this was the case. The

departmental manager was the chairman of a KTX and could ensure the KTX was serving the purpose of increasing productivity.

#### Trade Union: Opportunity and Challenge

The trade union at the Drydocks is confronted with a combination of opportunity and challenge. The opportunity consists of the direct and frequent access to top level decision making in the Drydocks. The creation of the worker elected Drydocks Council is among others the result of the struggle for power of the trade union movement. The union first sent its own executives to the Board of Directors, representing the Drydocks workers, and later made way for a directly elected body of workers representatives at top policy making level: the Drydocks Council. The Executive Committee of the Metal Workers' (Drydocks) Section of the GWU consults the Council and has a place on a number of important committees at Drydocks level, such as the action committee, the finance committee, the personnel committee, the safety committee and the welfare committee. Through these committees the union is involved in the making and implementation of company policy. Apart from contributing to the running of the company the union can also see to it that the basic rights of workers are not violated. The Union Executive is quite happy with this possibility of representing the interests of the members since it can now choose its stand with a deep knowledge on the process of decision making and a possibility of being involved in the entire process of allocating resources. But the trade union also faces a challenge, it no longer is the sole representative of the workers. How to define its place vis-a-vis the Council and the KTX? For the trade union

Executive, the KTX poses the greatest problem. The Executive finds that the KTX does not keep to its main task: to look after production, but that it first of all tries to represent the interests of the workers. In the view of the Executive, the KTXs were experimental but have proved not to be proper organs. They only function well where shop stewards got on the KTX through election. Shop stewards on a KTX can ensure that trade union business is not taken away by the KTX. The Executive is now encouraging shop stewards to contest elections for the KTX so as to be able to control these better. The shop stewards presence on the KTX, according to the Executive, is highly desirable.

While the trade union would force the KTX to stick to its role, it also wants to force management to accept participation. The executive is disappointed with the conservative attitude of management and is sure management effectively disrupts the present system by contacting either KTX or shop steward according to convenience. One of the Executive said: "the present system is a safety net for management".

The Executive is determined that participation should continue. But it should be improved and made more clear, and the trade union role in it should be better established. The union, according to the Executive, does not want to go back to the situation of antagonism, it has discovered through its own experience that the interests of the worker and of the company are not two opposites, but often very congruent. The present austerity measures, which under previous circumstances would have been strongly resisted, have been accepted by the trade union in the interest of the workers. The union finds such a longer term perspective a much better

perspective for labour. But how to explain it to the workers? It is of prime importance that education should be given to the workers, the KTX and to management.

#### The Drydocks Council

In a long interview with the Council members the rather complex picture of the KTX was confirmed. According to the Council the KTXs are disillusioned, because management stands in their way. Also according to the Council, management is too conservative. They do not want anyone to interfere in planning the running of the Drydocks, in financing, etc. "If management cooperates, participation will function better." The Council is determined that management will have to accept participation.

The Council members do not see the conflict between shop stewards and KTX as the biggest problem for participation. One of them even said the problem was "a mere triviality". According to another Council member, the KTX or the Council are quite in order if they listen to a complaint or a problem of a worker. Through the union it takes much more time. "We go to the manager and often take the worker along: if the worker is right, we instruct the manager, if he is not, we tell the worker to accept the decision of the manager". It is realized that thereby trade union terrains are entered, but since it is seen as for the good of the worker and for production: "who could be against it?"

Yet another member of the Council finds that the KTX is not right in taking up trade union matters. There should be a clear distinction between the interests of the workers generally in relation to the interests of the

company (KTX) and to individual and personal interests of workers (shop steward). If that is taken into account, the KTX and the shop stewards could easily co-exist.

The Council members have regular meetings with groups of workers, during break time. These meetings can be heated events. Sometimes workers are shouting and ooing, but the Council members find they have to face the workers so as to know their complaints and ideas. The Council wants to involve KTXs and trade union in such meetings so as to create a direct link between workers and the institutions through which they are represented.

The Council are determined to defend and expand workers' participation. In their experience the most important aspect of participation is that it gives more dignity to the worker. "Participation has been a big eye opener". So much so that the Council finds that they have a moral obligation towards the working class to try and expand participation also to other enterprises in Malta..."We have to get it into some big people's minds that participation is good for all workers and should be applied in all enterprises". If workers are involved in decision making, in the opinion of the Council members and on the basis of their experience, these are no longer used as a tool. They are treated with more respect, reassured in their own capacities...."These things are very important for a worker". Some Council members say they are prepared to "fight like apostles" for participation.

Basically the Council is satisfied with the structure of participation of the Drydocks: a worker-elected Council which the highest authority, and a team of professional management to work for them. The principle is not

yet fully realized. The Council has to supervise closely the implementation of its policy. It had even instituted an action committee to that effect. At the level of the KTX it is more difficult, and KTXs are often ignored by management. Management will have to grow in its role in the participatory system. Mutual confidence and trust are necessary. There has to be a continuing exchange. It is the duty of managers to explain the consequences of certain decisions, and it is the duty of the Council or KTX to consult management and to respect its competence. If management sees the KTX behaving in a responsible way, they will be more at ease with the participatory system. But by outsmarting and outwitting each other, or by taking quick resort to Council assistance in order to mobilize its power, management and KTX generate conflict.

The Council is concerned about the trade union. Whereas the Council has a growing system of liaison with the KTXs, they feel that the Section Secretariat does not have a similar liaison with the shop stewards. Section meetings are held occasionally. It is felt, however, that more regular meetings would enable a better flow of information and coordination.

The Council members (as do the trade union officers, shop stewards and the KTX members) say that the major single improvement needed is education. Educating the KTX members, the workers, the union, the management, in the spirit of participation. Then also, the workers will elect the right people and everybody will be able to play his/her role.



## V. SUMMARY ANALYSIS

### The KTX

The KTX members are frustrated since they do not get the power they think they should have. Many of them are quite realistic: they do not claim to have the knowledge and competence to run the department they work in. They hope to learn. Their frustration does not originate here. Their frustration is caused by not being allowed to get involved in decisions to which they can contribute. For their lack of competence they are ready to blame themselves but they feel they could overcome this: they are new on such a job. But all the time they clash with management when they want to develop in their roles as KTX members. The adamant feeling of superiority of most managers is seen by them as the biggest stumbling block. Also cooperation with shop stewards is important but a manager willing to deal on equal terms with KTX remains the first necessary condition for its successful operation. The KTX thus depends on the discretion of others. Its possible power is not derived from facilities attached to the position of a KTX. Moreover, the decisions of the KTX do not have a clear status in the overall decision making process. Normally KTX decisions would have to be implemented at the department level. But departmental managers are instructed from above in the traditional management hierarchy. Even when sympathetic to a KTX advice or decision, they may have to refer it for implementation to higher level management if they feel it may be inconsistent with higher level decisions. At the higher levels, there is once more the chance that the managers at that level are against participation; or may

even simply forget to handle the case. A KTX can contact the Council for help, and this happens from time to time, but the KTXs can not do this time and again. They realize this would burden the Council too much. The KTX has only an advisory status, so that their inputs into decision making often simply dissipate in the management hierarchy.

In that way many KTXs do not continue to 'waste time' on the decisions which infringe upon traditional management prerogatives. Judging the possibilities they have they start being actively involved in decisions which they can possibly handle. Their official statute then becomes a dead letter. They become resourceful in defining their own competence and terms of reference. And it is precisely in such a context that KTXs will be much tempted to pick up what is called 'trade union business'.

It would appear that the KTXs do so because both managers and workers expect them to do so. If management fears the KTXs will usurp their traditional prerogatives, they will easily push the KTX back to deal with traditional issues of negotiation and grievance, issues that were already agreed upon disputed ground for long. After all, management seems to argue that as these KTX members are elected by workers, let them deal with issues on the workers behalf. They expect the KTX to settle difficult social problems with the workers. The managers may be led by feelings of self-defence but also by interpreting the KTX role in the traditional framework.

Also the workers themselves push the KTX into trade union business, as was often mentioned by the KTX members in our interviews. The 1982 survey confirms this to the extent that 20% of the workers ascribe a purely traditional trade union function to the KTX.

Those who do not want to lead the KTX in this direction, of course, are the shop stewards. They accuse the KTX of infringing upon their work. But the context of power and culture to a large extent forces the KTX to behave as it does.

#### The Shop Stewards

The shop stewards are also frustrated. But their frustration does not emanate from not being able to get more influence, like the KTX members, but from losing the influence which they once had. This frustration permeates the interviews and can be easily understood. As erstwhile sole representatives of workers at the department and shop floor level, they now operate in a system which is officially worker controlled, and they can get no grip on that system. The only principle they can refer to is that the KTX is there for production and that they are there for the workers. But in practice it does not work that way. The KTXs take both the interest of the company and of the worker into account and this is unacceptable for the shop stewards. In establishing their own roles they had ample discretion in 'pre-participation times'. The trade union statutes do not specify the role of the shop steward very clearly and leave it to the shop steward which problem to tackle. The shop stewards are better equipped in terms of education (not less than some sixty per cent of them have attended an educational programme). The shop stewards are supported by a trade union organisation to whom they can refer their problems and where they can find other forms of assistance.

But in the present situation they operate in a company whose workers themselves have elected the highest authority of decision making, company policy is made by the worker-elected Council, who relate to the 17 worker elected KTXs who help in supervising the execution of Council decisions, and act as a liaison to the Council to inform them of the workers' problems and ideas. The shop stewards appear to be at a loss how to define their role in this new situation. Even when many workers expect the shop stewards to conform to a militant tradition they have come to realize the possible benefits of participation and are prepared to play a role in that framework - except for a few stewards who would prefer to play out their traditional antagonistic and militant roles. But they do not get a chance of finding a meaningful role for themselves because of the expectations of workers and the existence of the KTX.

The opinion survey has confirmed that many workers expect the shop stewards to play a traditional role. Interestingly, the majority of the workers agree that the trade union pursues a participation policy in the Drydocks - but with respect to the shop stewards they have not changed their mind so much. They want to be able to refer their individual, immediate and short term problems or grievances to the shop steward. In other words, even though workers have widely accepted the principle of participation and a changed position of the trade union in that perspective, the majority of them expect the shop steward to defend 'us' against 'them', on pragmatic grounds. Also other interpretations of the survey results have pointed out that there is among workers an experiential, pragmatic persistence in

demanding a traditional role from their shop steward in areas which count most: the day-to-day bread and butter matters, and disputes.

Also the existence of the KTX and the stereotyped image KTX members have of shop stewards, play an important role. The KTX members see themselves as working for the good of the company and for the good of the workers. They see the shop stewards as narrowly defending the rights of the workers only, rightly or wrongly. Consequently, the KTX does not involve the shop stewards in the majority of the cases. And, here again, the shop steward is compelled to play a traditional role, since it is often not admitted by KTX to get involved in the participatory framework. The shop steward has thus landed in an isolated position. So much so that it would appear as if the shop steward feels there is a conspiracy of the KTX, the Council and management against the position of the shop steward. This explains the obsession of the shop stewards vis-a-vis the KTX. The shop stewards thereby cultivate feelings of competition and resentment since they are the ones whose function is being eroded by the KTX. Thus workers' representatives (shop stewards) militate against workers' representatives (KTX). Management fuels this antagonism as it is against participation at KTX level.

#### Two Opposing Orientations

The core of the problem would appear to be that two different principles of labour relations simultaneously apply to the Drydocks and guide the behaviour of Council, trade union, KTX, managers, shop stewards and workers. The first principle is that of workers' participation in its

fullest form (self-management), namely that power derives from labour and not from capital. Workers have the right of control of the production process and the right of appropriation and allocation of the fruits of production. The Council and the KTX are institutions which give concrete shape to that principle.

The other principle of labour relations is that capital ownership is the source of power and thereby controls the production process and the right of appropriation and allocation. In such a situation capital uses labour. (In the opposite, self-managed situation, labour uses capital). When capital uses labour, labour will struggle through a process of revindication to get a maximum share out of the capital owner.

The capital ownership principle has applied long in the Drydocks and has determined basic orientations of workers and managers. Workers try to maximise their share (pay, overtime, allowances, etc.) and managers have obtained their 'managerial prerogative' where no room exists for worker involvement in decision making.

Interpreting the results of our interviews globally, one could conclude that even though the principle of labour control applies in the Drydocks (on a legal basis), the orientation of many persons and groups is not consistent with it. The members of the Drydocks Council and the members of the KTXs are, on the whole, 'participatory' in their orientation. But the managers are, on the whole, non-participatory, traditional in orientation. (They accept the Council but they hold on to their prerogatives). Some managers at departmental level are prepared to experiment with participation. The workers have largely accepted participation 'on principle' but continue to

hold pragmatic, traditional orientations. Shop stewards combine a participatory and a traditional orientation, though some of them are most of all traditional. At the level of the trade union Secretariat the same combination is found, though at this level the participatory orientation is stronger.

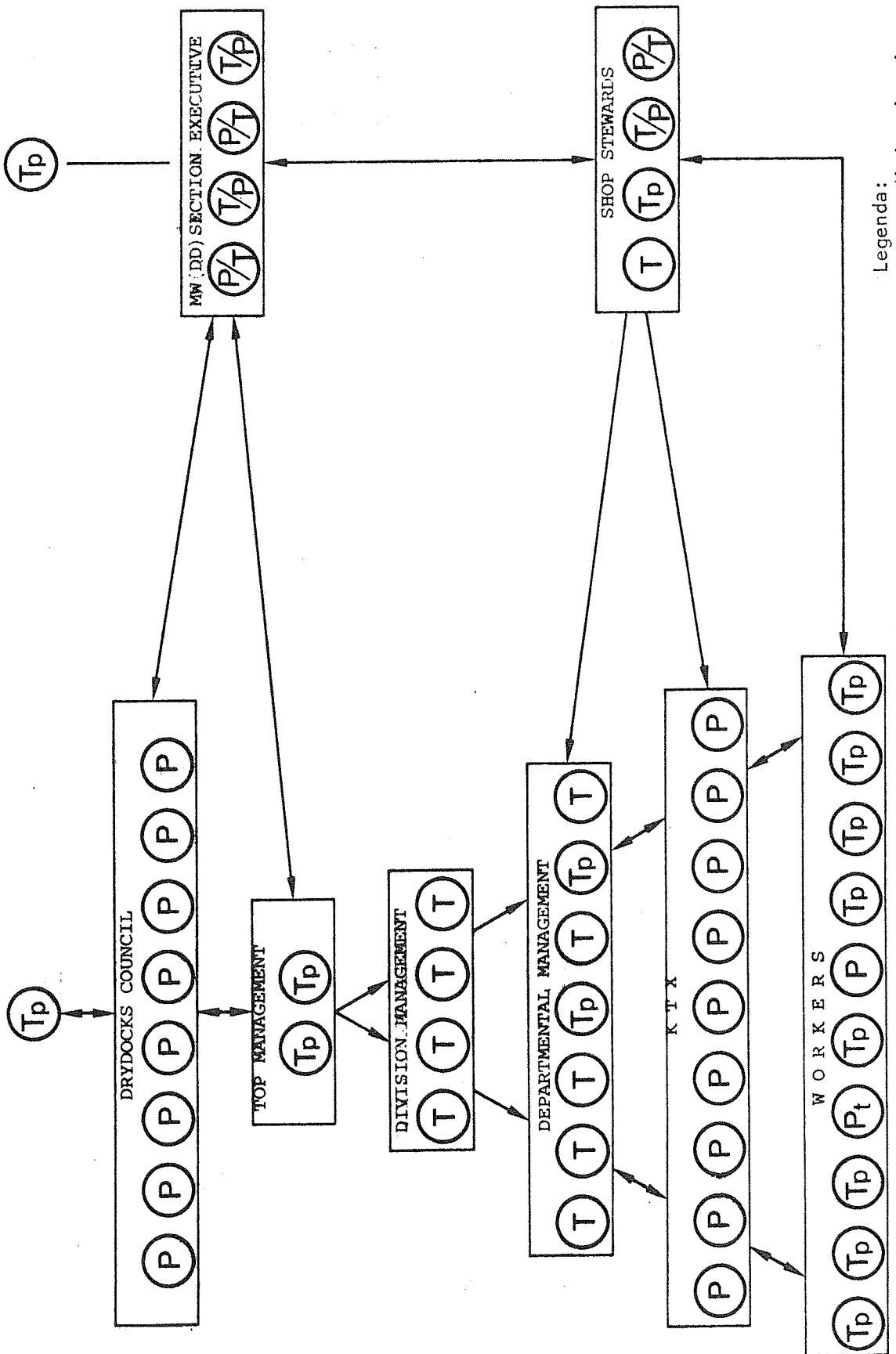
In Diagram 1 this global assessment of different orientations is sketchily mapped out. The diagram also contains an assessment of the orientation at national level, since in our evaluation of policy options this level is also considered. At national level politics (Labour Party and Government) we find, on the whole, a traditional orientation, and certainly not an active participation policy. Nevertheless, the principle of participation is accepted. The same holds for the top level of the G.W.U.

What can be easily seen in the diagram is that in the overall decision making structure the two opposing orientations occur at different levels. The Council can guide its behaviour along participatory principles since it is at the top of the power structure but has problems of implementation at management level since there the orientation is different. The KTX is almost isolated: they cannot apply the principle and are frustrated. And the shop stewards while tending to adopt a participatory orientation are allowed only to operate in the traditional way. The basic challenge, it seems to us, is to ensure that the decision making process in the Drydocks and the representation of workers be arranged according to one principle of labour relations only.

DIAGRAM 1

TENTATIVE SUMMARY SKETCH OF KEY POSITIONS IN THE PARTICIPATORY PROCESS AT DRYDOCKS  
(explanations in text)

National level politics (Government/MLP, etc.) → National level trade union (GWU)



Legenda:  
 T = traditional orientation  
 t = idem, but less  
 P = participation orientation



Policy Proposals

One of the matters discussed during the interviews was the future development of participation at the Drydocks. Diagram 2 shows how the KTX, the Shop Stewards, the Secretariat of the Metal Workers Section, the Drydocks Council and the managers each choose different solutions for the problems in the Drydocks. And that at times their solutions are contradictory or mutually exclusive. Here the consequence of different orientations and different experiences becomes immediately visible. The diagram also almost painfully shows the lack of unity of purpose. Things are not going well at the Drydocks. For this, some blame management, others the KTX, again others the shop stewards. And also the workers are blamed, for instance in meetings where the workers were addressed by Government ministers.

Workers are blamed in a system where they are 'masters in their own house'. Workers claim overtime when there is no real need. How can that happen? The answer is perhaps because they are confronted with a decision making structure which makes this possible. If that is so, nothing is wrong with the workers but something may be wrong with the structure. There is enough evidence to suggest that that is indeed the case.

DIAGRAM 2

Summary sketch of solutions as seen by KTX, shop stewards, trade union, Council and management

	solutions according to KTX...	solutions according to shop stewards...	solutions according to DD trade union section executive...	solutions according to Drydocks Council...	solutions according to management...
Solutions with respect to KTX....	(a) should improve own performance (b) should get more power (c) KTX to be legalized	either scrap KTX or contain its power	KTX can stay but not enthusiastic about it. If stays: shop steward seek election	KTX should become more important; can be reached by forcing management to accept.	KTX could be 'tolerated' with an advisory function Better scrap them!
Solutions with respect to shop stewards:	No comment	should be ex officio KTX members; KTX and shop stewards should cooperate	should continue in their function and KTX should not pinch their functions	no comment	maintain the shop stewards' traditional functions
Solutions with respect to trade union in general	no comment	no comment	can continue as it does today	should liaise more with shop stewards	should continue its traditional function in its present 'responsible attitude'
Solutions with respect to Drydocks' Council	O.K. as it is	O.K. as it is	O.K. as it is	O.K. as it is; and ensure implementation of its policy	O.K. in principle but "better educated members"

DIAGRAM 2 (Cont'd)

Solutions with respect to management	force management to accept participation and KTX manage	leave room for managers to manage	no comment	management should change attitude and behaviour in favour of participation	management should have power where it has responsibility
Solutions with respect to workers	change the attitude of workers	workers should understand participation better	no comment	we should face them and listen to their problems	workers will go where they feel the power lies
Other solutions suggested.....	Education	Education	Education	Education	Education
	Take participation out of context of political polarization				Take participation out of context of political polarization

(N.B. If "no comment" is mentioned this means that the issue was not raised in the interview)

## VI. POLICY OPTIONS

### Two Systems of decision making based on two opposing principles

The analysis has shown that the development of participation at the Drydocks lacks unity of purpose. Two different systems are at work at the same time: the participation system, and the capital - labour dualism system. The latter is the traditional pattern of labour relations, in which labour tries to negotiate the best possible terms for its labour and where management and the capital owner (trying to maximize returns on capital) are the opposite side.

Specific reasons allow the two different systems to continue. The Drydocks Council is the very expression of the principle of participatory self-management. The existing legal provisions for self management should enable the Drydocks to function accordingly. But in spite of such legal basis the Council appears not to be able to consistently implement participation throughout the enterprise. The Council members are determined to implement participation, to follow up their policy decisions. They sometimes even intervene at management level so as to force implementation of their policy decisions. But they can derive legitimacy (justification) only from a philosophy they largely produced themselves.

They are confronted with a management hierarchy, which does not behave according to principles of accountability to workers. Management defends its vested interests and is set to resist involvement of workers. They seek legitimacy in a still existing general societal norm that decision making

powers should derive from ownership and managerial competence, and not from labour.

In attitude and behaviour management, in general, continues to operate with the traditional orientation of labour-capitalism. The KTXs demonstrate an attitude of bitterness, aggression and also resignation. The KTXs do not have any grip on management, even though they are from time to time protected and encouraged by the Drydocks Council. The danger is there all the time to slide back to labour - capital dualism, fighting against management instead of trying to generate a joint decision making process between management and labour. No wonder that shop stewards feel threatened not only because they think the KTXs are taking over their traditional functions, but also because no new roles in the participatory system were defined for them by the GWU nor by any other organization. At higher levels of trade union hierarchy participation is accepted. But the trade union has not defined new functions and roles for shop stewards or for the trade union itself in a participatory texture. The trade union continues to make a distinction between protection (rights of the workers) and production (duties of the workers). By and large, trade union leaders at the Drydocks believe that protection should be trade union business and production the KTXs business. By implication they thus do not allow the KTX members to take both production and protection rights into consideration when participating in the internal decision making structure of the enterprise.

Summing up, there is a process of polarization between orientations and behaviour at the Drydocks. Management, not accepting accountability to labour, reinforces its own attitude by behaving as if neither Council nor

KTX existed, and building up a stereotype negative image of the participation system. Their behaviour leads to criticism from Council and KTX who reassert their participatory rights against an increasing escape by a management officially accountable to them. Thereby management and Council on the one hand and management and KTX on the other grow further and further apart. There is no dialogue to sort problems out. Instead they increasingly blame each other whilst taking resort to frameworks of legitimacy which have a different origin and philosophy.

The same process of polarisation emerges between the KTXs and the shop stewards. They seem to operate more and more on their own, blaming each other. Also here dialogues are not very frequent.

#### Towards one system

The conclusion must be that workers participation at present does not function well at the Drydocks. It does not follow that therefore participation is to be rejected. If participation does not function as it should or as it could, ways and means have to be found to make it function better. The system of decision making in the Drydocks will have to be based on the principle of participation only.

This can be reached by making the system more transparent, assigning to each actor in the decision making process a consistent role, ensuring that these roles are mutually agreed upon. What is foremost needed:

- a) A clear assignment of roles to the Council, to management, to the KTXs, to the shop stewards and the trade union respectively.

- b) A clear definition of the relations between Council and management, management and KTXs and KTXs and shop stewards.
- c) When defining these roles and relations, the basic principles of participatory management have to be taken into account. It has to be insisted that the worker representatives have a policy role to play, and managers continue to have executive decision making roles. Managers are accountable to elected workers, whilst retaining executive management functions and responsibility. The council as well as the KTXs represent the workers in the internal decision making structure of the enterprise. They take into account both the interests of the company and of the workers, striking a balance.

The trade union also represents the workers, but not organically within the decision making structure of the enterprise. It surveys, promotes, defends and represents the interests and rights of the workers from a position of independence vis-a-vis the internal decision making structure of the company.

- d) It is extremely important for all actors including management and trade unions to accept that decisions are taken according to a new principle of labour relations. This implies that all have to respect and accept each others' roles and respect and accept the procedures through which to deal with each other. It should be pointed out that a very important principle of labour relations could be made to work in the development of participation at the Drydocks, namely, that whilst retaining different opinions,

perspectives and interests, the different parties could seek to agree on the procedures of interreaction. Such agreement is necessary if one is to deal with one another in one single framework of decision making. \*

#### The Drydocks Council

The Drydocks Council is a fully recognised institution, its status and power having been defined in separate legislation. It was already mentioned that the Drydocks Council is by and large an accepted institution. In reaction to the analysis, two specific remarks were made which deserve mentioning here.

According to some, a possible change of the composition of the Council could prove useful. At present only rank and file workers can be expected to be elected on the Council, though formally speaking all ranks can be elected. In practice, various competences and experiences available among other members of the enterprise who are less numerous, particularly managers, stand no realistic chance of being elected to the Council. It could be argued that it depends on the wisdom of the workers whether they are prepared to give their vote to managers or other staff. It could also be argued that a provision could be made which guarantees a minimum number of two or three Council members from the ranks of the clerical and managerial staff. It is perhaps an interesting issue for debate.

\*Specific remarks could be made, in the framework of the observations above, on the Drydocks Council, KTX, management, shop stewards and trade union. A number of such remarks will be made below, sometimes more sometimes less elaborate. It should be remembered that the present document is presented as a discussion paper.



The work of the Council could be improved if it strictly keeps its role to policy making and the overall supervision of the follow-up of its policy decisions. The present tendency to deal with the execution of policy decisions, and intervention in the way managers execute policy, could in the long run be harmful for a good relationship between Council and management. It is important that the Council be concerned with the follow-up and implementation of policy. Strictly speaking (following the principle of keeping policy and execution separate) the Council's interference with executive management could be substituted by a different line of action whereby the council ensures the implementation of its policy through the management hierarchy.

#### A better functioning KTX

The KTX statutes clearly outline the functions of the worker representatives; they have to deal with productivity, efficiency, human resources, safety and welfare and a just work distribution. The statute confers a consultative capacity on these matters but does not state what such advice is worth. Officially, management can negate the advice. In practice, the Council from time to time reasserts the advice of the KTX against the will of management. The Council thereby creates the impression that the KTXs do have decision making powers over management. But in the statutes relations between KTX and management have not been specified, and the role of management vis-a-vis the KTX has not been stipulated either. The KTX members thus become totally dependent on the benevolence and understanding of management. We have argued on the basis of the research

findings that management attitude and behaviour explains by and large the ineffectiveness of the KTX.

Moreover, the members of the committee appear to be uninformed and hardly induced to play their role. They have not received any specific training or education for the committee work to be done. They are left to their own devices and discretion when it comes to defining the role they have to play on the committee.

When improving the functions of the KTX the first thing to be done apparently is to change the statutes and to incorporate amongst others the following elements. Perhaps the underlying principle must be made explicit that KTX members when representing workers have to combine the defence of interests of workers with interests of the company, the workers' rights and the workers' duties. The precise function of a KTX could be to reconcile these two interests when arriving at conclusions on all important matters which have been decided at the level of the department. Obviously, the KTX should neither discuss overall decision making of the Drydocks (which is Council competence) nor individual problems or complaints (which is trade union business).

It is very important to make clear that the KTXs represent the workers at the level of the department to formulate an element of policy, taking into account rights and duties of workers. Ideally, the committee members should set criteria leaving the carrying out of the decisions to the departmental managers. It should be stipulated very clearly that the committee is there for policy making and that management is there for the execution of policy. By implication management will be solely responsible

for the execution and the committee for policy. Management should accept to be accountable to the KTX for the way they execute policy. The committee members, in view of their experience at the place of work, could of course give important suggestions and advice with respect to execution of policy, but for continued good KTX-management relations it is important to leave execution to management so that its responsibility is clearly established.

In view of this, it is important to create (or rather restore!) trust relations between committee members and managers. This could be already enhanced by creating a framework of clear and agreed upon procedures of interaction. Consensus might be reached on how to deal with each other. Matters that have to be worked out are amongst others: on what and in what form should management give information to the KTX, how and when should management be present at committee meetings, always or only at times indicated by the committee, or also when desired by management, etc. Of course, the status of the decisions of the KTX has to be accepted by both KTX and management. Ideally, such procedures should be established through discussions between management and KTX members (and possibly others) and not be imposed on one of them or both of them from outside. The degree of agreement on procedures can be expected to grow to the extent that all involved take a part in their establishment.

It is important to work out a definite arrangement whereby the KTX will deal only with decisions affecting the department and not with personal issues of workers. A procedure should be established between KTX and shop stewards on how to relate individual and group decisions. This will be further discussed in this report.

The power base for the committee has to be clearly established. At this moment the status of the KTX is derived from the legal power of the Council, since the Council has established the committees. But it should be desirable to regularise this further, perhaps through legislation or at least formal recognition of both status and statutes of the KTX. A method by which such recognition in the eyes of both management and workers could be established is to hold elections for KTX membership every two years instead of every one year, and to let elections coincide with the elections for the Drydocks Council. KTX and Council would thus be seen as one framework of representation of workers. The two-year-office of the worker representatives would enable committee members to gain more experience and train themselves better. International research has established that a two year office is an optimal period for worker representatives.

The changes proposed above, and many others, would be of little value if not supported by a well thought out educational policy for participation at the Drydocks. We will return to this educational policy later on.

#### Proposed changes for management

It has been concluded that management at the Drydocks has hardly changed its behaviour or perspective after the introduction of participation. Though they are working in a legal system of accountability to labour they still behave as if they were accountable to (private) ownership, from where they derive managerial prerogatives. Their relations to the KTX have not been regulated (as mentioned above), which makes it easy

for management to ignore the KTXs. By and large managers do not accept to work in a particular context.

For a change of the managerial position in the Drydocks to come about it seems extremely important to reassure them that they will continue to play the same technological role of the execution of decisions, and that they will remain responsible for it. The managerial task of decision making is not affected by the change to a participation system. What changes is the framework of accountability. Previously, managers were accountable to a board of directors appointed by the owners (private owner or state owner) and now they are accountable to a Council composed of representatives of workers. Briefly, they are now accountable to labour instead of to capital. Management may fully understand this change of accountability and the new "source" of managerial prerogative, but they could politically reject the new framework of accountability, being ideologically set against it. In that case they cannot but be forced to accept the new framework. They operate after all under the legal statutes of participation. It then crudely becomes a take-it-or-leave-it question, and it might even be necessary to enter into the contract of managers that they have to work in this new framework of accountability, possibly with sanctions imposed in case they were not prepared to accept that framework. A similar situation existed earlier. If a manager refused to execute policies of the Board of Directors, disciplinary action would have been taken against him. The Council will have to be firm in this respect. In its turn, the Council may have to stop intervening or interfering with managerial executive decision making, since otherwise they would undermine the responsibility of

management. In fact, through intervention the Council creates the very condition for management to waive its responsibility, and strengthen the lack of trust between worker representatives and management.

Restoration of trust relations between workers and managers is important. In the earlier days of the KTX management attended their meetings. Both should accept and reject each others role, and should realize that both are working at the Drydocks as members of the same enterprise but in different roles. Traditional antagonism, confrontation and hostility should today be out of place, since managers no longer represent a (private) owner, and since workers should no longer constitute a group of people who emphasize only their rights and never their duties. Again this is an area where structural changes can do very little if not accompanied by a well designed policy.

#### Modification of the role of the shop steward

Shop stewards at present feel they are performing a dust-bin function. The KTXs are involved in department level representation of workers, and leave the shop stewards to deal with only individual complaints. Sometimes even KTXs take upon themselves the representation of individual complaints. Shop stewards are not against participation, but neither the trade union nor those involved in the participation structure have defined a clear new role of the shop steward under new circumstances. A new role for the shop steward is needed in order to avoid erosion of their overall functioning and to prevent conflicts between KTXs and shop stewards.

If participation is to be the system of the Drydocks the shop stewards and the trade union can be expected to support it. They should not criticise the KTXs to hell, but praise them to heaven!

The following three elements of a new role for the shop stewards could be considered:

- a) The shop steward could continue to represent individual complaints and wishes of the workers, but explicitly within the framework of the participatory decision making structure. Complaints of workers are no longer complaints against decisions made by managers on behalf of private owners, but against decisions in which representatives of workers were involved. It has to be recognised that even when decisions were taken by representatives of workers, individual complaints could legitimately exist and should be dealt with. This clearly remains a shop steward role. From a position of independence the shop steward, bearing no responsibility for participatory decision making, can take the responsible people to task.
- b) A second important function of a shop steward is to continue to ensure that trade union standards of work relations are taken into account in the decision making by worker representatives and managers in the Drydocks. For instance, trade union standards on safety and health, on certain wages structures and policies, on overtime, leave, etc. Shop stewards can thus protect workers from infringement of basic rights won for the workers by their trade union, rights which could be overlooked from time to time by worker

representatives who have to weigh rights and duties of workers, who have to balance worker interest and company interests. One could imagine that conflicts could arise from time to time between shop stewards and participatory decision making, and the shop steward has an important function here. Also in the execution of this function it is important that shop stewards are independent from the decision making structure.

- c) Thirdly, the shop steward could play a completely new role, and that is to defend workers participation. Workers participation has become a new right of the worker. Also this right has to be defended, elaborated and consolidated. If members of KTXs or Council are not allowed to function according to the powers vested in them, the shop steward or higher trade union levels could come to the help of worker representatives to re-assert their rights. At the level of the KTX the shop steward could expose managers who are not prepared to work according to the statutes, or they could militate to expand statutory powers of the KTX.

All this does not take away one practical problem: the shop stewards are losing some of their traditional functions. Because of the emergence of the KTXs they will have to understand and accept that a number of things they used to discuss as the sole representatives of workers, are now discussed by the KTXs. However, new functions have come instead in a participatory structure: a different role of the trade union is at stake. It is important that the shop stewards fully understand the shifts in their



function, accept their new functions and the new role of the trade union. Again education is an important instrument for achieving such understanding.

#### Shop stewards on the KTX?

The conflicts between KTX and shop stewards cannot be solved by appointing shop stewards on the KTX. Shop stewards and KTX have different roles to play. The KTX members represent the workers in a setting of an enterprise run by and for the workers, taking into account 'production' as well as 'protection'. They take part in the internal decision making process, for which they assume co-responsibility. Shop stewards play a much more partisan role when defending workers. Even in a structure where workers are involved in the decision making process, protection of rights of workers continues, if only for instance to protect collective worker controlled decision making against self-exploitation, to guarantee trade union standards, and represent individual grievances if they arise. It seems desirable to keep those two roles separate in a participatory structure. Both are needed.

An important point to keep in mind is that cooperation between KTX and shop stewards remains essential. Both have to keep in continuous touch in order to see what both can do for workers. This necessitates them to have a perfect understanding of each others role, and a preparedness to pass on from one to the other particular issues so that they are dealt with in the right framework. Such communication and cooperation could be achieved by allowing shop stewards to sit on the KTX meetings.

Complications could arise if shop stewards obtained voting rights. In minority they can be out voted; in majority, there is no need for electing a KTX. A most important reason not to give voting rights to shop stewards is, however, the confusion of roles. Another possibility might be for the shop stewards to seek election on the KTX just as the other candidates do. If then elected on the KTX they have voting rights and have the mandate of the workers to act on the KTX as a committee member. As shop steward they can continue to defend the workers in a different framework. It is possible to combine these two capacities. However, it is known that combining two such roles can be confusing, especially if the motivation of the shop steward to seek election on the KTX is to continue his shop steward role also as committee member. This would confuse issues and harm the development of participation.

The position of a shop steward independent of the KTX will be more easily accepted by shop stewards if they have a clearly defined role in a participatory structure. The essence is to define new roles for shop stewards, who should not become the critics of the KTX but their guardians, champions and allies. Together, they can impose on management to accept participatory decision making.

#### Modification of trade union roles

In an opinion survey (1982) it was shown that workers believe that the trade union should play a different role in a participatory system. No less than 81% of them expressed they would like the trade union to support participation or to enter into participatory structures. Interestingly,

workers saw a different role for the trade union in the Drydocks than elsewhere.

Also the union itself is convinced of the benefits of participation, particularly at the level of the Executive Council of the GWU Drydocks Workers' Section at the Drydocks. However, as stated earlier, this preparedness has not yet been translated into concomitant action. The frame of reference remains the trade union's traditional role.

If participation is to flourish in the Drydocks, the trade union could play a clearer supporting role. This may first of all necessitate a more comprehensive reorientation of the trade union. It is known that the General Workers Union supported the process of developing workers participation especially in the period 1971 through 1979. After that, the GWU's emphasis on participation has lessened and has gradually almost disappeared altogether. In recent years, participation at the Drydocks has developed with little support of the GWU leadership who have stopped elaborating principles and practice of participation. There may be moral support to participation, but there is no longer an agreed-upon participation policy and strategy. The experience, practice and problems of trade union officials at the Drydocks has become more and more out of touch with the development of the thinking in the GWU in general. As a consequence, if trade union officials in the Drydocks want to refer to overall trade union policy and orientation, they can only refer to traditional trade union functions and ideas, and not to a clear-cut participation ideology which was at some time in the making but is now almost absent.

For the development of participation in the Drydocks it would be very helpful if national level trade union leaders would educate themselves more in the concepts of participation so as to be able to develop a union policy. A reorientation of the union leadership has to precede reorganisation of trade union functions. The overall trade union movement could at least follow a two track strategy, one along the traditional lines and one along participatory lines. Through such a two track strategy the trade union could extend more vigorous support to the participatory rights of the workers, and could be seen to take the lead in developing a participation policy. This would help the workers and trade union officials as well as workers representatives on Council and KTX at the Drydocks. These would see that what they do has the approval and active support of the trade union movement as a whole. It would also prevent workers from seeing the participation framework as in competition with a trade union framework.

There are two contingency remarks to be made. It is important for the trade union to interest itself actively in participation, preparing for the eventuality of another political party to take government power. In such a case the trade union will no longer work with the support of the Labour Government, and will have to defend the rights for participation on its own. Besides, it is in general important for the trade union to modernise itself and to respond adequately and positively to a trend to greater democratisation of labour relations all over the world. The experience of the Drydocks and the support to the Drydocks experiment will help the union to modernise its own orientation and structure. The momentum reached in the 1980s in this respect could be regained and consolidated.

The need for an overall policy

Participation has now become the common good as it were of the Council and the KTX members. Within Council and KTX, the values, the meanings, the limitations and possibilities of participation have been explored, developed and consolidated. Living experience with participation in the day-to-day decision making of the Drydocks has been the source of an emergent participation ideology. It is important that these ideological 'streamings' are articulated along political and social lines and are not left to the few activists in the Drydocks.

The Malta Labour Party has adopted a policy that participation should emanate from the workers' experience. Such grass-roots based policy must at a certain stage be solidified otherwise new values and meanings remain in the air like loose flying ropes. There is a need for elaboration of policy, in the same way as was argued a while earlier for the General Workers Union. Such political coverage and encouragement is also needed for other reasons. It is politically important to develop participation because of its humanisation, democratisation, equal distribution and human resources development perspectives, in short, for its emancipation potential. Thus, participation could be an important rallying point for a labour policy. The experience in the Drydocks could be emanated instead of isolated. Educational programmes could refer themselves to such a policy, and thus gain legitimacy.

The most important condition for the development of participation is to create a support structure. To develop participation, investments have to be made which will have economic, social and political returns. These

returns could be calculated in a cool way by those who are not convinced of the necessity of a participation policy. What should be an important argument for them is that a participation policy if well implemented, should result in a committed, self confident and motivated work force.

### Education

All workers, managers, shop stewards, KTX members, Council members and others at the Drydocks think that 'the other' side needs education. This is the result of the different orientations each of them have. Thus, they blame 'the others'. Education and training constitute a weak dimension of the participation system. Even those who are supposed to function regularly in participatory structures have no education neither on participation in general, nor on how to perform their functions. Rather conversely, the shop stewards tend to be the persons with most education in the kind of role they have to play,...however, exactly the kind of education that does not help to understand or to improve the functioning of participation. Shop stewards use a booklet on the role of the shop stewards which was printed in the 1950s, at the same time when the Drydocks were still a colonial outfit.

Several types of education are needed:

- a) First of all political education, explaining the role of workers in labour relations and the importance of participation for social political and economic life. Such political education should of course not be indoctrination, but should sensitize the persons involved in participation for the possible benefits and for the differences between participation and other structures.

- b) Furthermore, education is needed in policy and strategy formulation of participation. Leaders of Party, Union, government and others do not have a systematic over-view of the field of participation and therefore cannot formulate an adequate policy, let alone a consistent strategy for its implementation.
- c) It is important to educate those who have participative functions to gain sufficient knowledge of the system of participation, to know why it exists, and how it should function. Of course, their competence for effective participation should be enhanced through training, explaining to them how they can best exert their participatory rights, and how they can increase their competence when they involve themselves in managerial decision making. In other words, also general and management education belong to the educational scheme for workers' participation.

Apparently, such an education policy needs elaborate coverage. Ideally, all workers, all shop stewards, all KTX members, all managers, all Council members should be exposed to such education. Obviously, on such a large scale the use of media, newspapers, possibly television, has to be considered. Here lies an important task for the Workers' Participation Development Centre. This Centre would need the appropriate material and political support in order to execute such an educational programme. It is in a unique position to undertake it since it works from a solid research base and in a framework of academic independence.