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# Organizations, Participation and Recession: An Analysis of Recent Evidence

Richard J. Long and Malcolm Warner

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### Article abstract

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# ***Organizations, Participation and Recession***

## ***An Analysis of Recent Evidence***

**Richard J. Long**  
**and**  
**Malcolm Warner**

*This paper examines the changing pattern of worker participation in organizations during recent conditions of economic down-turn. The authors conclude that the current recession has served as a catalyst to force many organizations and their members to recognize that traditional management approaches and resulting employee responses have become increasingly inadequate in the light of wider social changes, and that there is more support for an «evolutionary ratchet» as opposed to a «cyclical» notion of participation.*

In the last decade or so, Western industrial economies have experienced the worst downturn since the thirties. As Albeda (1984, p. 1145) points out: «Economic growth rates went down from a comfortable five or six percent in the sixties to one or two percent, and several countries have reached negative figures in GNP development... After so many prosperous years, after having full employment during such a long period, this is a very traumatic experience, influencing each sector and every aspect of society. Of course, labour relations are not excluded.» It is the purpose of this paper to examine the effects of the recent recessionary economic conditions on patterns of employee participation in management in Western Europe and North America.

Our main argument is that the major impact of the recession (with regard to worker participation) has been to make both managers and workers increasingly aware of the inadequacy of traditional organizational structures and relationships between managers and employees, and the need

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\* LONG, Richard J., Professor, Department of Industrial Relations and Organizational Behaviour, College of Commerce, University of Saskatchewan.

WARNER, Malcolm, Professor and Coordinator of the Research and Doctoral Programme, The Management College, Henley and Brunel University, West London.

to develop new structures and relationships. Underlying this argument is our belief that a variety of fundamental changes have occurred in the socio-economic structure of Western Europe and North America over the last one hundred years that make traditional bureaucratic organizations and management-worker relationships no longer viable. However, until recently, generally favorable economic circumstances have largely masked this problem, although many progressive organizations have long recognized this problem and have been making the necessary transitions. Socio-economic changes of particular importance have been the increasing turbulence of organizational environments, increasing complexity of technology and products/services, and higher general standards of living, education, and expectations with regard to the intrinsic nature of work and social egalitarianism.

Clearly, there has been considerable variation in terms of how organizations have reacted to recent economic circumstances, with some taking advantage of reduced union power to dismantle or neutralize certain participative mechanisms, particularly those which were imposed against their will in the first place (see Hardy, 1985). Some have even gone so far as to launch full scale attacks on their trade unions directly. At the same time, others have launched various types of worker participation programs, particularly those perceived to have a direct impact on organizational effectiveness or on enhancing labour-management relationships, because they see these as the only viable solution to their economic difficulties.

We believe that ultimately, this third approach will prove to be most effective, and that those firms utilizing participation effectively will recognize the new structure as being a better long term fit with the socio-economic conditions that have emerged. Furthermore, workers (and more progressive managers) will be very loathe to go back to the former system after having experienced enhanced need satisfaction arising from a more participative work structure. Thus, we tend to support the «evolutionary ratchet» (Brannen, 1983) or the «favorable conjunctures» (Poole, 1982) conceptions of the evolution of participative work structures, rather than the «cycles of participation» concept proposed by Ramsay (1977, 1983).

However, regardless of the underlying forces supporting the development of participative work structures and relationships, it is also posited that managerial desire for worker participation is the prime variable, in the short run at least, mediating between forces for participation and its actual emergence. (In the long run, firms which are incapable of adapting their structures to the new socio-economic environment will not survive, and the current recession appears to have hastened this process.) Thus, a major purpose of this paper is to examine attitudes of managers (and workers) towards various forms of participation.

Before doing so, some of the specific ways in which economic and political forces affect the emergence of different types of participation will be examined. It is important to note that declining economic circumstances may have negative effects on some types of participation (such as traditional collective bargaining) while causing others to expand dramatically (such as quality circles or employee ownership).

The complex role of economic conditions as an explanatory variable is illustrated by programs to enhance job level participation (eg. job redesign, semi-autonomous work groups). These were initiated in a number of countries in the late sixties largely in response to the good economic circumstances (*i.e.* labour shortages) of the times coming together with certain long term social/demographic trends, which resulted in problems of excessive turnover, lack of motivation, and inability to recruit workers for certain «undesirable» tasks. On the other hand, the poor economic circumstances of the late 'seventies and early' eighties have also stimulated many organizations to launch such programs in an attempt to cope with these circumstances.

Finally, we will examine the empirical evidence on how various forms of participation have fared over the last decade. We feel that it is crucial to clearly distinguish between the different forms of participation when doing so, and will deal with five main types: (a) formal indirect (representational) participation, (b) collective bargaining, in both the adversarial and integrative modes, (c) formal direct participation, (d) informal participation, and (e) employee ownership and profit sharing. Although the primary focus here will be on British evidence, comparisons with North America will be made whenever appropriate. More background on the Western European situation can be found in Jain and Giles (1986).

## ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL FORCES

### Direct Effects

It may be argued that declining economic circumstances and rising unemployment can affect organizations and their members both directly and indirectly. The *direct* effect occurs when economic crisis hits a particular firm. Managers may react in a number of ways. Their economic difficulties may highlight a basic mismatch between their current way of managing and their external and internal environments. Regarding their difficulties as symptomatic of the failure of old ways of managing, they may seek a fundamental change in relationships between employees and management. This may be facilitated by a greater awareness on the part of unions and employees of their common interests in maintaining the viability of the firm.

The second approach would involve treating the economic difficulties as a temporary phenomenon to be survived until things «return to normal». Both management and unions would agree to temporarily suspend the adversarial approach, now seen as an expensive luxury. Managers might then respond to the pressures of increasing competition by experimenting with new ways of organizing work. These might involve joint management-union agreements regarding the terms on which new technology is to be introduced and may provide for employee consultation prior to implementation (see Warner, 1984, 1985).

Last, management could view the temporarily reduced power of unions and employees as an opportunity to unilaterally impose a variety of changes to work practices and conditions of work, probably along more or less conventional (classical) lines, as would be predicted by Marxist theory. Staff deemed to be surplus would be cut, as would be wages and benefits, if possible.

However, we would argue that this third approach would be self-defeating in the long run, since unions have historically been strongest when opposed most bitterly by management and with the return of good economic conditions they would likely wreak their vengeance on management. Perhaps more importantly, this approach will do nothing to rectify a fundamental mismatch between the organization's structure and the circumstances surrounding it.

### **Indirect Effects**

The indirect effects of poor economic conditions would be felt through some third party, or intervening variable, such as the decision of the state to change the law on industrial democracy (see IDE, 1981a), or to otherwise influence the behaviour of firms through one of its agencies. In the first instance the state might change the formal participative structure in enterprises in order to encourage more collaborative and flexible work practices within each enterprise.

Another way in which there might be an indirect effect is where a change in public opinion leads to the election of a left-inclined government which might bring in legislation to promote industrial democracy (c.f. IDE, 1981b). An example of this might be the Mitterand administration in France (see Goetschy, 1983). Similarly, the re-election of Palme in Sweden has opened the door to the implementation of the «wage-earner fund» proposals (see Himmelstrand, 1983), as we shall see later.

Conversely, the election of the Thatcher and Kohl governments in Britain and West Germany has stifled any advance in the direction of legislation favourable to the labour movement (in the eyes of organized labor). However, the British government does support a variety of legislative programs to promote certain aspects of worker participation, including employee share ownership, profit sharing, and cooperatives, as well as maintaining the Work Research Unit to advise organizations on job level participation. Corporations are also required to include a statement in their annual report detailing measures they have taken to enhance employee participation.

In considering other developments in worker participation during the recession, at the macro-level at least, the experience of France and Sweden stand out as special cases. Conservative governments have fought hard to block the implementation of the Vredeling proposals (at European Economic Community (EEC) level) to extend the rights of employees to be informed about company policy with regard to dismissals, redundancies, and the like. It also looks unlikely that the implementation of the Fifth Directive will advance much in the present political climate.

France has been a conspicuous exception to this general trend. The Arnoux Report of October 1981 set the scene for reform of industrial relations and worker democracy in France. It aimed at ensuring the 'employees will gain real citizenship within the firm' (Goetschy, 1983, p. 86), so that they could become «actors of change within the enterprise». It plans to expand workers' rights regarding their employers and to express their views directly on working conditions, through the creation of «homogenous work-groups (workshops or office)», (1983, p. 87), in firms with more than 200 people.

Another policy involves the extension of workers councils to small firms employing between 50 and 99 people while collective bargaining will now be practiced at industry as well as plant level. Annual negotiations within firms of fifty or more are also proposed. As well, the French Government has announced that most public-sector companies will have to set up, by June 1985, administrative or supervisory boards in which employee representatives will constitute at least one-third of the board, and be elected by and from their colleagues.

In West Germany, works councils have now won information rights concerning the design and installation of VDU systems, but no automatic rights of codetermination, as a result of a recent judgment from the Federal Labour Court. This may set a boundary vis-à-vis the rights of codetermination on the new technology in German firms as far as the Act of 1972 is concerned.

Significantly, despite the election of «conservative» governments, most institutionalized forms of industrial democracy continue. The co-determination laws in West Germany still remain on the statute books, as a Conservative majority governs. However, the German experience during the recession does indicate the importance of the change of government. While the extensive program of «work-humanization» (*Humanisierung*) has continued its rate of growth will now be frozen and there will be a change of emphasis. Organizational experiments will continue, but efforts to remedy stress will be central. The right-inclined government in Germany has also shown some enthusiasm for extending profit-sharing schemes and employee-ownership arrangements as has the similarly-oriented Thatcher administration in Britain.

In comparing North America to Western Europe, we would expect to see less emphasis on macro-level responses and more on innovations in individual firms. Indeed, many individual initiatives in participation have been undertaken in companies most facing foreign competition, particularly those in traditional industries such as auto, steel, and rubber, where plants have faced closure. However, there has been one major exception to this general predisposition against system-wide intervention in the United States, and this applies to employee ownership, a development to be further discussed later in the paper.

## **EMPLOYEE AND MANAGERIAL ATTITUDES TOWARD WORKER PARTICIPATION**

This section will first attempt to assess the actual attitudes toward participation held by both managerial and non-managerial employees. Following that will be a brief discussion of factors affecting managerial desires for worker participation.

### **Empirical Evidence**

Perhaps the most thorough empirical assessment of British attitudes toward employee participation was conducted by Heller *et al* in 1979 (c.f. IDE, 1981a). Two separate methods were used to collect data: (a) a field study of fourteen companies in the metal working and banking and insurance industries and (b) a national random household sample of 1 725 persons in full time employment. Several interesting findings emerged. First, non-managers desired a moderate increase in influence in decisions at all three levels (the job, the department, and the organization) but were

most interested in issues relating to their immediate job environment. In general, however, their aspirations were quite modest and would be satisfied if management asked for and took account of their opinions in decision making at each level. They tended to see a role for both personal, direct participation as well as representational participation. While they tended to believe that trade unions produced the most effective form of representation they were also willing to see a role for other types of representation, such as through a works council or board representation. When asked to choose between consultative committees or worker directors, blue-collar employees tended to prefer board representation while white-collar workers were evenly split.

Not surprisingly, managers in this sample tended to prefer informal and direct worker participation to formal and indirect worker participation. Nonetheless, there was a surprisingly high level of support for some worker representation on the board as majorities in each managerial group (ranging from 56% among top management to 67% among supervisors) expressed support for this concept. Interestingly, most managers also felt that they themselves have less participation in decisions than they should have:

«The average middle manager cannot usually do more than give an opinion even on routine decisions like assignment of tasks or improving working conditions. He does not usually feel his opinions are taken into account, and he certainly does not get involved in joint decision making». (Heller *et al.*, 1979, p. 50)

This might well diminish their desires or ability to permit participative decision making by their subordinates.

In a survey of British managers conducted at about the same time (in 1980), Poole *et al* (1981) found opinion to be more negative toward worker participation. For example only a very small minority (just under 11%) of respondents believed that worker directors elected through trade unions are an appropriate form of employee participation. Similarly very few (19%) believed that extending collective bargaining is an appropriate form of participation. There was strong support for the notion of participation through regular supervisor/work group meetings (66.5%) and nearly half of managers (48.5%) were willing to endorse the concept of joint consultation committees, with only a fifth (20.7%) opposed. Finally, nearly half of the respondents (48.9%) either believed that employee participation diminishes the role of middle and junior managers or were unsure about whether it did. Managers also believed strongly (81.1%) that their views ought to be represented in any plan for employee participation.

In a somewhat earlier study (conducted in 1977) reported by Ursell (1983), it was also found that British managers had a much higher preference for direct worker participation than indirect participation. Less



than a third believed that the organization's interests would be served by the extension of collective bargaining (31%) and even fewer (28%) believed this to be the case for worker-directors (both considered «power hard» forms of participation). On the other hand, majorities of managers believed that work group meetings would serve the organization's interests (60%), as would job redesign (at 52%) (both considered «power soft» forms of participation). Overall, it was found that 27% of these managers were personally opposed to any of these four approaches, while some 34% supported «soft» forms only and an equal number supported a combination of both «hard» and «soft» forms. Almost none (5%) supported the use of the «hard» forms only to extend industrial democracy. In contrast, the great majority (70%) of a sample of shop stewards taken at the same time supported both «hard» and «soft» forms as their preferred approach to «industrial democracy». This is consistent with the Heller *et al* (1979) finding that non-managers look favourably on virtually all forms of participation.

A useful study of managerial attitudes toward participation was carried out by the Industrial Participation Association, which surveyed all members in September 1982. Some 251 replies were received (approximately 50% response rate), with 18% being completed by senior line managers or directors, 59% by personal managers or directors, 9% by trade union officials (many of whom are very senior in their unions), and the balance from a mixed group of consultants, academics, and others. Although there was some variation, most companies were large (over 5 000 employees) and were concentrated in the manufacturing, oil and gas, and chemical sectors.

Managers generally found legislated or formal types of participation undesirable, with a very small minority (less than 20%) supporting either the EEC draft directives on participation or the formal extension of collective bargaining over operational issues (with the exception of new technology, where just over half believed this to be appropriate). Trade unionists diverged sharply from managers on the most desirable form of participation, with just over half (52%) supporting formal participation and nearly two-thirds (65%) the establishment of statutory works councils, although even here less than 40% supported the EEC draft directives. Majorities of unionists also supported a statutory requirement for consultation on investment and financial plans (83%) as well as the extension of collective bargaining (65.2%).

In terms of direct participation mechanisms, just over half of managers and 61% of trade-unionists believed semi-autonomous work groups a good thing, although less than a quarter of each group saw them as likely, with a slightly more favourable pattern shown for quality circles. Informal participation and increased information sharing was strongly supported by all

parties. Finally, in the area of employee ownership, managers drew a sharp distinction between increased employee share-holding (which they strongly supported and believed likely) and creation of worker cooperatives (which they did not), while unionists showed a similar but less extreme pattern. Strong majorities in each group supported widespread extension of profit sharing in both private and public companies.

The results of this survey are consistent with earlier surveys in a number of ways. First, there remains a very strong managerial preference for informal direct participation rather than formal indirect means. Indeed, opinion towards worker-directors and worker-councils seems even more negative than previous studies have indicated. Second, trade unionists express a favourable opinion of all forms of participation, with the exception of worker representation on the board, where support falls slightly below 50%.

### **Factors Affecting Managerial Attitudes**

Rather strangely, very little empirical attention has been devoted to uncovering the determinants of managerial desires for worker participation, as Long (1982) has noted. Those studies that have been done have either confined themselves to examining single factors thought to affect willingness to use participation, such as functional specialization (Cascio, 1974) or decision permanence (Rosen and Jerdee, 1978) or have examined senior managers only (Heller and Wilpert, 1981; Dickson, 1982).

Citing a need for increased research on this topic, Long (1982) hypothesized that there are a variety of situational factors, aside from personality factors and ideological beliefs, that may affect managerial attitudes toward employee participation in decision making (PDM). Furthermore, he argued that these factors will differ depending on the type and level of employee participation under consideration. In examining these propositions, Long (1983) surveyed samples of managers in two Canadian firms. A complex pattern of findings showed that correlates of managerial desires for worker participation in decision making at three levels (the job, departmental, and organizational policy levels) did, in fact, differ considerably, and that the most powerful determinant of managerial desires for worker participation was the belief that increased worker influence would improve decisions.

At the job and departmental levels, the amount of influence managers believed that they had in doing their own jobs was directly related to the amount they were willing to grant to employees, in one of the two samples.

However, contrary to expectations, those managers who were least satisfied with behavioural and attitudinal conditions within the firm were most likely to endorse higher levels of employee participation. (This may support our earlier contention that many managers see participation as part of the solution to company problems.) Interestingly, personality variables did not play a major role in affecting these desires.

It should be noted that both samples were relatively small, and whether attitudes of these North American managers can be generalized to Europe is problematic. The Heller and Wilpert (1981) study suggests they might be. However, it does help to explain why many North American managers have reacted to perceived organizational difficulty by expanding worker participation, if they are convinced greater employee influence would improve organizational decision-making. This utilitarian orientation suggests that the recession can in fact be the catalyst to lead managers to adopt a more participative approach. But they cannot be expected to do this if their own influence is sharply circumscribed, or if they feel threatened or excluded from the employee participation process, as many British managers appear to feel.

## **CURRENT TRENDS IN PARTICIPATION**

This section will attempt to assess the development of each specific type of participation in recent years. Although the focus will be on recent developments in Britain (see Warner, 1982, 1983, for background), comparisons will be made with both North America and Western Europe.

### **Formal Indirect Participation**

Two main types of formal indirect participation will be discussed here — worker councils and employee board representation. Although statutory works councils do not exist in Britain, recent evidence (Daniel and Millward, 1983) indicates a surprisingly high proportion of «joint consultative» committees in British establishments, as well as a pattern of substantial growth in these bodies (Marchington and Armstrong, 1981). For example, Daniel and Millward (1983) found in their extensive 1980 survey of workplace industrial relations that some 37% of establishments reported at least one active consultative committee, with this proportion rising to over 80% in enterprises with more than 1 000 employees. Some 14% of these were established in the period 1975 to 1980, while only 2% were abandoned during this period.

It was quite clear that these committees did not serve as an alternative to collective bargaining, but in most cases existed along side collective bargaining. Daniel and Millward concluded that (1983, p. 135) «consultative committees may tend to become an adjunct to the institutions of collective bargaining where workplace trade union organisation is well established, but provide an alternative channel of representation where it is weak». In fact, Marchington and Armstrong (1983, p. 31) found that «where stewards are well organized they seemed to value joint consultation, albeit with limited powers, and where they were poorly organized they were negative or neutral about it», in their study of 18 joint consultative committees conducted in 1980.

Although some observers (eg. McInnes, 1983) are skeptical about a «renaissance» of such joint consultation mechanisms, these findings are consistent with those of Cressey *et al* (1981) who sampled Scottish firms employing more than 500 persons in 1979. They concluded that there were three main forces behind the resurgence of employee-management committees, which had generally been initiated by management. First, they represented an effort by managers to demonstrate that industrial democracy could be achieved through voluntary means. Second, they represented an attempt by management to respond to union demands for more information, given the uncertainty caused by the onset of recession, and to attempt to establish a cooperative atmosphere. A third force, they suggest, was the influence of government pay policy «which encouraged the establishment of self-financing productivity deals, a development which usually required union cooperation».

Britain's experience with worker board representation, on the other hand, has been very limited, with the main experience coming from two government-owned organizations — British Steel and the Post Office — which instituted minority representation in the seventies. These experiments did not spread, and Towers *et al* (1981) could only find five examples of private sector firms where worker directors had been appointed in the absence of ownership. All of these were established at the initiative of management and took place in the early seventies. Although these firms were unionized, the unions were generally indifferent to the development, and participated in the selection of worker directors in only two cases.

### **Collective Bargaining**

Although there are a wide variety of specific factors that affect union power, such as cohesiveness of membership, two main factors are of general importance: (a) economic circumstances and (b) political and governmental

support. Certainly since 1979 the latter does not obtain in Britain, and of course 1978 saw the onset of a deepening recession which only now shows signs of bottoming out.

The year 1979 may, in fact, represent a watershed for the trade union movement as it represented a peak in membership, reached after decades of continuous growth, of over 13.3 million persons (55% of the British work force). By the end of 1982 this figure had dipped to below 11.5 million, and by 1984 was close to 10 million. Although membership fell by 11.6% during 1981 and 1982, employment fell by less than half that (5.5%) during the same period. This reflects the relatively greater loss of jobs among the traditionally unionized sectors, particularly manufacturing. Membership actually increased marginally in some sectors between 1981 and 1982 — most notably services, insurance and finance, and utilities — although altogether these sectors comprise under 12% of union members.

This change is reflective of the economic restructuring that has been taking place in Britain for many years as the balance of employment has gradually shifted from blue collar to white collar occupations. In this sense, the current recession has simply applied the final blow to many slowly dying firms in the traditional manufacturing sector. Those that do survive will be those who can increase productivity in order to regain competitiveness, and this will, in the short term at least, further reduce employment. Of key significance will be the application of automated production technology.

How, then, have the recent economic circumstances affected the collective bargaining process? Although opinions abound, the published empirical evidence is less abundant. However, a recent study of 10 manufacturing companies in «a typical Midland town» (Chadwick, 1983) does shed some light on the issue. One of the interesting findings was that the employers did *not*, at least in these cases, take advantage of this opportunity to aggressively attack the union. As Chadwick (1983, p. 9) puts it «Employers have regained significant job control, but, unlike their counterparts in the States, it has been achieved whilst still protecting and maintaining the credibility as well as the existence of the local trade union organization». Their main approach for increasing control of industrial relations has been to introduce consultative arrangements «to settle many of the issues previously determined by collective bargaining and custom and practice». Despite this, employers take great pains not to violate the «form» of negotiation. As a *quid pro quo* for worker acquiescence in this process, management has recognized the need to provide detailed information about the organization and its finances.

An important development in collective bargaining in Britain during the sixties and seventies had been the emergence of the shop steward move-

ment, and the divergence of the informal from the formal system (see Warner, 1982). In his study of the shop steward movement during the recession, Batstone (1983) found results largely consistent with those of Chadwick. Using the post, questionnaires were sent to the personnel managers at a sample of large manufacturing concerns in June 1983, and he bases his analysis on 124 plants, which accounted for over 2% of employment in the manufacturing industry. He found that only a small minority of firms (about 20%) admitted to adopting a firmer line with stewards and workers, and that an even smaller percentage (15%) were attempting to reduce the role of unions. In only one instance had the shop steward organization actually been removed.

In fact, the most common response of those two-thirds of the sample who indicated that they had made major changes in their approach to shop stewards over the last five years was that shop stewards have become more fully involved and are now consulted more fully (reported by half of the plants making changes). Although in «nearly nine out of ten plants, formal consultation with union representatives existed prior to 1978... the depth of consultation has increased considerably since then, largely — it would appear — as a means of impressing upon shop stewards the harsh realities of economic existence in an endeavour to achieve cooperation» (1983, p. 11).

Respondents were also asked whether they had made any major changes in their approach to employees over the last five years. Of the two-thirds claiming to do so, about 75% indicated that these changes included some form of worker participation. Quality circles are now present in about 20% of plants, compared to none five years ago. Of the 20% of plants that have semi-autonomous work groups, half have been implemented since 1978. About 60% of plants report having briefing-groups, with about a third of these introduced since 1978. Employee reports are distributed in 75% of plants, with a third of these being introduced since 1978. Finally, while just under a third report having consultation with non-union representatives, the usage of this mechanism has not changed at all in the last five years. Interestingly, Batstone (1983) could find no significant relationship between direct employee involvement and union strength.

North America has also experienced an upsurge in union-management cooperation coincident with the current economic difficulties, as Jacoby (1983) notes. In his historical analysis, he notes that the United States has experienced two previous waves of such cooperation — in the 1920's and during World War II. However, the first experience buckled under the weight of the Great Depression, while the second dissolved in the post-war economic boom. He therefore argues that union-management cooperation may flourish during periods of moderate economic distress, and contends

that «in England in the early seventies... union support for cooperative endeavours evaporated under the pressure of a turn in the economy from bad to worse» (1983, p. 19). However, he also suggests that there are now a number of important differences in today's environment which may support continued cooperation, such as strong foreign competition, and that the prospects for union management cooperation in the United States appear good in the short run at least, a view echoed by Deutsch and Albrecht (1983) with particular reference to QWL programs.

One development commonly occurring in the United States but not as frequently in Britain is «concession bargaining» (Beaumont, 1983). Under this approach the focus is not on increasing the rewards provided to employees, but actually minimizing the loss of such rewards. The classic case is the Chrysler Corporation, where the firm's very survival was in serious doubt several years ago. The union agreed to forego wage increases and reduce paid holidays in return for a limitation on layoffs, provision of company shares to all employees, and appointment of one member to the board of directors. In another example the October 1984 General Motors agreement with the United Autoworkers Union includes provision for greater participation by the union in management decisions relating to re-training and investment for new jobs, in return for concessions on labour flexibility (see *Financial Times*, 1st October 1984, p. 27). In contrast, British unions appear to have adopted the stance of holding firm on wages and benefits, which their critics argue, may result in more bankruptcies, and hence fewer jobs.

To the extent that union seeks and achieves features such as increased involvement in decision making, stock ownership, and increased information, that it would not otherwise obtain, then concession bargaining can be regarded as a vehicle to promote worker participation. For example, Strauss (1984) points out that some U.S. and Canadian firms have offered job-control via quality of working life programs in exchange for job-control via work rules.

This issue was empirically investigated in American corporations by Capelli (1982) who identified 211 cases of concession bargaining in 1981 and early 1982. Fifty-two cases were found to involve *quid pro quos*. Sixty percent involved employment guarantees, 35 percent future wage and benefit improvements, including cases of share ownership and profit sharing, 10 percent additional information on firm performance, and eight percent increased involvement in company decisions.

However, all of these developments in the United States must be viewed against the union backdrop there, with the most significant factor being the long term decline of union density (which now stands below 20%, after

peaking at 35% in 1950), with this loss of membership predicted to continue (Strauss, 1984). This is in contrast to Canada, where unions have held their ground or even improved their representation (Rose & Chaison, 1985).

### **Formal Direct Participation**

This category includes those types of participation which create structural mechanisms that allow direct involvement by employees in decisions that affect them, and three main types are discussed here — *job redesign*, *semi-autonomous work groups*, and *quality circles*. There is little question that, of all participation mechanisms, quality circles have experienced the greatest surge in popularity in Britain. Starting from a base of almost nil at the beginning of this decade, they numbered well over, 2,500 in 500 organizations by early 1984, according to the National Society for Quality Circles, which itself was formed only in 1982.

In essence, the concept — borrowed from the Japanese who borrowed it from North American behavioralists — involves regular meetings between a supervisor and department members (on a voluntary basis) with the objective of identifying ways of enhancing productivity, in both qualitative and quantitative terms. (In this sense they are similar to the well-known Scanlon Plan, but contain no explicit procedure for sharing the financial gains resulting from productivity improvements.) However, as Ishikawa (1981) points out, their objectives are considerably broader than this simplistic description might imply and include aiding self and mutual development, improving morale, and managing the implementation of accepted ideas.

Bartlett (1983) sampled 108 British firms that had attended a seminar on quality circles during the past year, and found that 28 (26%) of them had actually started quality circles. He found the usual response of unions (19 firms were unionized) was positive, with 12 fully supporting implementation, three remaining neutral and just four skeptical or negative. Overall, in eleven companies the circles were regarded as «successful», in eight they were deemed failures, while the final six experienced enough success to survive.

Dale and Hayward (1984) studied some 63 British companies which had possessed quality circles. They found that most firms (63.5%) reported the failure of at least one individual quality circle, although only seven firms (11.1%) had actually discontinued their quality circle programs. The reasons for the failures were highly varied, but the main reasons included the following: (a) redundancies and/or company restructuring caused by the economic situation, (b) labour turnover, (c) circle leaders lacked time to organize meetings and (d) a lack of cooperation from middle management.



Quality circles can now be found in most western European countries (Bank & Wilpert, 1983; Hutchins, 1985). For example, QCs in France date from 1978, although the movement there did not take off till 1980, and the French Society for Quality Circles (*l'Association française de cercles de qualité*, AFCERQ) was founded in 1981, (Simonet, 1983, p. 32). Worker opinion is divided on these mechanisms with many believing them as supporting the conventional hierarchy of authority. Others think that they are a step in the right direction and will permit participation «drop by drop» (1983, p. 40).

Other than quality circles, «quality of working life» (QWL) experimentation in the form of job-redesign and semi-autonomous work groups has been limited in Britain, especially with comparison to the rest of Europe and North America, where the QWL movement has been gaining popularity for the past ten years. Both Canada and the U.S. have established national agencies to promote QWL experimentation, and many organizations have been experimenting with the concept.

### **Informal Participation**

As discussed earlier, there appears to be a gradual movement toward more participative management approaches, especially in non-traditional industries. The past few years has also seen an increased willingness for management to share information, especially financial, with employees. A major impetus for this may be an attempt to make employees and unions moderate their pay demands by «proving» the poor financial condition of the organization. Whether this willingness to share information will persist once economic conditions improve remains to be seen.

### **Employee Ownership and Profit-Sharing**

Many individuals argue that a completely employee-owned firm represents the ultimate potential in worker participation and industrial democracy. On the other hand, profit-sharing seems a marginal case. However, there are at least three reasons to include it here. First, existence of profit-sharing can reflect an attitude or philosophy within the organization that workers are partners in the enterprise, rather than simply hired labour. Second, profit-sharing is frequently accompanied by information sharing and enhanced communication. Third, it may enhance and legitimate employee desires to participate in decision making, which may then lead to increased participation. In general, empirical research suggests

that there is some linkage between financial participation and participation in decisions, as an Incomes Data Service survey (cited in Grayson, 1984, p. 22) concluded: «almost without exception, the companies (with financial participation) are advocates of participation, involving employees in the decision-making process».

Employee-owned firms in western society can be broadly divided into two main categories: (a) those operating under the *cooperative model* and (b) those operating under the *corporate model*. Under the cooperative model, the enterprise is owned by its «members» (employees) only, who normally each possess one share in the cooperative and one vote in its governance, but only as long as they are employed there. Members own the cooperative individually or collectively. Under the corporate model, ownership is based on the purchase of company shares, which may or may not be traded on the open market. Control is normally allocated on the basis of one vote per share of stock owned, and there may well be owners other than the employees. By far the greatest number of these firms are corporations in which employees own only a small percentage of company shares.

Corporations in which a majority of their shares are owned by employees (other than one or two person firms and those owned primarily by top management) are relatively rare, and generally arise as a result of the conversion of conventional corporations. While conversions may occur for a variety of reasons, one of the most important is where the firm's survival is in question. In addition, there have been many cases where the former owner has sold, or less frequently, given, the company to its employees.

The most commonly found type of financial participation in Britain is clearly profit-sharing. A 1980 survey by the Industrial Participation Association (Bell, 1980) found that 187 companies, employing 1.5 million workers, (56.7% of the 330 companies that responded to their survey) have some type of financial participation. Of these firms, 137 (73%) reported profit-sharing plans as one of their financial participation mechanisms.

Of the 96 firms having some type of share ownership plan, 21 have executive share option schemes only. The remaining 71 allow broader employee participation in shares through «save as you earn» (SAYE) share-option schemes (31 companies), employee share-purchase schemes (18 companies), and employee-shareholding trusts (11 companies). Excluding executive share-option schemes and trusts, companies with share plans cover 674,200 employees, and 59,630 (8.8%) actually own shares. Of the eleven companies with share ownership trusts, three are completely employee owned while the remainder vary between 3.6% and 24%. Altogether, they cover 55,930 employees. Most of these are relatively re-

cent, with 50 of them operating under the 1978 Finance Act. Overall, some 59 profit-sharing plans were established in the five year period 1975-1980, compared to only 23 in the previous five years, and only 55 in the entire period prior to 1970.

Since this survey was conducted (in 1980), there appears to have been an upsurge in share-ownership and profit-sharing plans, likely primarily due to provisions of 1980 Finance Act, which extended the 1978 Act. By March 31, 1983, 227 new profit-sharing plans and 215 new savings related share-option schemes had been set up under the 1980 legislation; and it was estimated at that time that 1 1/2 million employees had access to some kind of share scheme (Grayson, 1984). Grayson (1984, p. 21) concludes that these schemes will increase in the future, with a major motive being «continuing development of participative management styles».

Nonetheless, developments in this area lag far behind those of other countries, most notably the United States, where profit-sharing is much more common, as are employee share plans (Long, 1984). Under the *Employee Retirement Income Security Act* (1974), which provides substantial tax advantages to firms undergoing conversion to employee ownership, at least 5 000 firms had embarked on this process by 1985, with perhaps 500 reaching majority employee-ownership by that time. A recent study by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO, 1986) indicated that over 7 000 000 U.S. workers were employed by these firms. An increasing number of states have also passed supportive legislation of various types.

The outright conversion of enterprises to employee-ownership in Britain has been quite rare, apart from a few widely publicized cases. These include three failing enterprises (Meriden Motorcycles, Kirkby Manufacturing and Engineering and the Scottish Daily News) converted to employee-ownership in 1974, which have all subsequently failed. Two successful examples, the John Lewis partnership and the Scott Bader Commonwealth, were largely donated to their employees by their founders, while National Freight was «privatized» by the Conservative government in 1982 by selling shares to its employees. In contrast, the late seventies and early eighties have seen literally dozens of U.S. firms converted to employee ownership, with a very low subsequent failure rate.

In addition to support from both political parties, the concept enjoys wide popular support in the United States. In an unpublished poll by Hart Associates several years ago, 67% of individuals surveyed indicated a preference to work in an employee owned enterprise, in contrast to government organizations or conventional business. This support is reflected by the spontaneous development of numerous support organizations, as well as a degree program in employee ownership established by Guilford College in North Carolina.

Clearly the most radical legislation in this area belongs to Sweden, where legislation for «wage-earner funds» will enable the collective purchase of Swedish industry on behalf of the employees in that industry (see Himmelstrand, 1983). Although the concept was formulated in the 1970's it was only implemented on the return to power of the Social Democrats in 1983. However, because of violent opposition to the concept (all opposition parties have vowed to repeal it if and when they return to power) implementation is proceeding very slowly. Furthermore, key changes have been made to increase the acceptability of this legislation, including provisions limiting the maximum shareholding in any one firm by the fund to less than 50% and providing for government selection of the fund trustees, rather than union or employee selection (Long, 1986).

In Britain, a notable recent development has been an astonishing growth in producer (worker) cooperatives. Although this form has been present for a long time in Britain, it has not until now achieved great prominence. After an initial surge in their development (which occurred during 1850 to 1880), their popularity went into a long decline as many failed, trade union support eroded on ideological grounds, and the successful consumers cooperative movement broke away. The birth rate of new co-ops steadily declined during the twentieth century, and total numbers dropped to as little as 30 by 1975 (Jones, 1976).

This trend reversed itself in the late 1970's and the national Cooperative Development Agency reported that by 1980 the number of cooperatives had increased to 300, reaching 500 by 1982 and 1 000 by early 1984. Of these, it is estimated that the great majority (90%) are «new starts», while some 8% involve «rescues» (conversion of failing business) and 2% conversion for other reasons. Although the average size of each co-op is small, (about 10 persons) the magnitude of this trend is startling. The passage in 1978 (with all party support) of legislation supporting creation of both a national and local cooperative development agencies (CDA's) partly accounts for the recent growth. By early 1984, about 90 CDA's had been formed in England, along with more centralized bodies in Scotland and in Wales. Although the creation of worker cooperatives has received widespread political support, it has generally failed to win endorsement from business (which has doubts about their economic viability) and the trade union movement (which worries about the role of the union in worker cooperatives), with the exception of the Welsh TUC and some individual unions. However, signs of the growing strength of the movement include the 1984 worker cooperatives trade fair (held in London) and the formation of several organizations to lobby for and promote the concept.

Despite this level of recent activity, Britain lags far behind some European countries in the development of worker cooperatives. For example, Italy had in 1981 nearly 20 000 cooperatives, employing some 200 000 persons. In February 1984, the number of worker cooperatives in France was reckoned at 1 269, employing a total of 40 438 workers. Finally, mention must be made of the complex of worker cooperatives located in and around Mondragon, Spain, which now employ over 18 000 persons in 104 enterprises — a level they have been able to maintain despite the recession.

The story is somewhat different in the United States, where the current wave of expansion in employee ownership has mostly taken place under the corporate, not cooperative, model. According to Jones (1979, 1984), U.S. worker cooperatives have a long history, but by late 1970's numbered only 100, employing about 10 000 persons. These fall into two main categories — (a) relatively long established «business» cooperatives, such as in the West Coast plywood industry, and (b) «alternative» cooperatives (the great majority) established relatively recently by those wishing not to work in conventional work organization or to provide their own products or services.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, we have seen that various forms of worker participation have experienced an upsurge in popularity and acceptance during the past decade in Britain as well as Western Europe and North America. Of particular importance have been those forms that encourage greater collaboration and cooperation within enterprises. Although in some ways the current recession has increased the power of management vis-à-vis workers, it has also heightened their recognition (in many cases) of the need for increased collaboration and that authoritarian power tactics alone are insufficient to achieve this. Thus, rather than using the recession as an opportunity to attempt to attack and destroy the participation mechanisms currently in place (especially those operating through the trade unions) many efforts are being made to create new structures to more directly enhance employee participation.

It has been argued here that the current recession has acted as a catalyst to force many organizations and their members to recognize that traditional management approaches and the resulting employee responses have gradually become inadequate in the light of changes in the structure of society over the past hundred years (see Walton, 1985). The generally favorable economic circumstances of the post-war period had largely mask-

ed this problem, although the most progressive enterprises had long ago recognized it and were already making the necessary transitions. Such firms have generally weathered the recession quite well, but many firms unable or unwilling to make this transition have experienced extreme difficulty or have disappeared entirely. Another force for participation is the ongoing trend away from the traditional blue-collar industries, where autocratic and adversarial attitudes have been most deeply entrenched. For white-collar employees, the advent of new office information technology frequently serves as a catalyst for increased employee participation, although this does not always occur (see Long, 1987, for a detailed examination of this issue).

Thus, it is our view that a variety of forces have now come together in such a way that will make a general retreat from participation at some future time difficult to imagine, although particular forms of participation may come and go. Those forms with the most promise centre around types that directly involve most employees in the operation of the enterprise (*eg.* quality circles) rather than those that do so indirectly, although over the longer run we would expect experience of these kinds of participation to lead to increased desires for participation at higher levels in the organization. Because of its ability to incorporate both types it is also expected that employee ownership will continue to increase in importance, especially in the United States but also in Europe. The future for traditional adversarial collective bargaining as the central means of participation appears dim, particularly in Britain and the United States, where it is concentrated in the declining industries. One North American observer even goes so far as to predict the possible disappearance of unions in the U.S. (Garbarino, 1984), although this may be premature in the light of growth in public sector unions. In contrast, Canadian unions have been able to hold and even increase their membership.

Overall, the evidence suggests to us much more support for the «evolutionary ratchet» (Brannen, 1983) or «favorable conjunctures» (Poole, 1983) approaches to conceptualizing trends in participation than the «cyclical» concept espoused by Ramsay (1977, 1983), which does not acknowledge the enormous changes in the social, technological and economic environments in the past hundred years in western industrialized countries. Additional evidence for this point of view lies in the fact that even when conservative governments come to power, conjunctive participation mechanisms already in place have not for the most part been eliminated, although the emphasis does shift to more direct types of participation. This implicit acceptance of these mechanisms by even those who had initially opposed them is perhaps one of the strongest reflections of the social changes that are serving to underpin increasingly higher levels of worker participation.

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### ***Entreprises, participation ouvrière et périodes de récession: une analyse d'événements récents***

Le présent article étudie les modes de participation ouvrière dans l'entreprise au cours des événements récents de la récession économique. On a soutenu que l'impact principal de la récession (en regard de la participation ouvrière) a eu pour conséquence de rendre les dirigeants d'entreprises de même que les travailleurs de plus en plus conscients de l'imperfection des structures organisationnelles traditionnelles ainsi que des relations entre employeurs et travailleurs. À l'appui de cette affirma-

tion, nous croyons que nombre de changements fondamentaux se sont produits dans les structures socio-économiques de l'Europe occidentale et de l'Amérique du Nord pendant le dernier siècle qui ont rendu invivables les organisations bureaucratiques traditionnelles et les relations de travail, soit l'agitation de plus en plus grande des milieux ambiants, la complexité de plus en plus forte de la technologie des biens et des services, la hausse générale des niveaux de vie, la croissance de la scolarité et les aspirations des populations quant à la nature intrinsèque du travail et à l'égalitarisme social.

En considérant l'influence des facteurs politiques et économiques, il est important de reconnaître que les divers types de participation peuvent être touchés de différentes manières. Par exemple, des conditions économiques régressives peuvent avoir des effets négatifs sur certaines formes de participation (telle la négociation collective traditionnelle), alors que d'autres augmentent de façon exagérée (tels les cercles de qualité et les régimes d'actionnariat ouvrier). Cet article analyse comment un relevé empirique de cinq types principaux de participation (la participation formelle indirecte, la négociation collective, la participation formelle directe, la participation informelle, l'actionnariat ouvrier et la participation aux bénéfices) ont fait du chemin au cours de la dernière décennie. Même si l'article met l'accent sur les développements qui ont eu lieu en Grande-Bretagne, on les comparera avec ce qui s'est produit en Europe de l'Ouest et en Amérique du Nord.

Pour ce faire, il est d'abord nécessaire de reconnaître que les forces politiques et économiques peuvent agir sur la participation directement et indirectement. L'effet direct se produit lorsque la crise économique frappe une firme donnée ou une industrie et que les dirigeants peuvent réagir de l'une des trois façons suivantes. S'ils voient leurs difficultés comme le symptôme de la faillite des anciens modes de gestion, ils peuvent rechercher un changement fondamental dans les relations entre le personnel et la direction. Ou encore, ils peuvent considérer les difficultés économiques comme un phénomène temporaire avec lequel il faut vivre jusqu'à ce que les choses «reviennent à la normale». Cependant, la direction et les syndicats peuvent s'entendre pour suspendre les luttes antagonistes qu'on considère alors comme un luxe coûteux et recourir à des solutions fondées sur la collaboration. Enfin, les employeurs peuvent estimer que le pouvoir amoindri des syndicats et des employés est l'occasion toute choisie pour imposer unilatéralement nombre de changements au processus et aux conditions du travail traditionnels. Ils peuvent même tenter de s'attaquer de front au syndicat lui-même.

Les effets indirects de telles conditions économiques médiocres peuvent même provenir d'une tierce partie, par exemple une décision du gouvernement de modifier la législation en matière de démocratie industrielle ou d'autrement influencer la conduite des entreprises par l'intermédiaire de l'une de ses agences. En Europe de l'Ouest, la France et la Suède ont favorisé la participation ouvrière par la législation. Même des gouvernements inclinant vers la droite (Grande-Bretagne et Allemagne de l'Ouest) n'ont rien fait pour démanteler les mécanismes existants de participation, bien qu'il y ait pu avoir une certaine tendance dans ce sens.

Quoi qu'il en soit des forces socio-économiques, un facteur-clé pour savoir si la participation ouvrière se concrétisera réellement consiste dans l'attitude des employeurs et des travailleurs à son sujet. En Grande-Bretagne, des enquêtes démontrent que le public apprécie modérément tous les types de participation, alors que les chefs d'entreprises préfèrent nettement la participation ouvrière directe (plutôt que la participation formelle et indirecte). Toutefois, bien qu'il n'y ait eu assez peu de recherche pour connaître les comportements des employeurs en général, il y en a eu un manque étonnant pour découvrir les causes des attitudes patronales à l'endroit de la participation.

En matière de participation formelle indirecte, on peut en considérer deux types principaux — les conseils ouvriers et la représentation des travailleurs dans les bureaux de direction. Les travaux de recherche démontrent qu'il y a eu une croissance notable des conseils ouvriers en Grande-Bretagne dans les dernières années et que la majorité des grandes entreprises disposent maintenant de comités consultatifs. Ces comités ne servent généralement pas d'alternative à la négociation collective, mais ils existent simultanément avec elle. Au contraire, la représentation des travailleurs dans les bureaux de direction — dont l'implantation est très faible — est demeurée stagnante.

Fait intéressant, les études portant sur le régime de la négociation collective en Grande-Bretagne ont démontré que la plupart des employeurs n'ont pas cherché à tirer avantage des mauvaises conditions économiques pour s'attaquer durement aux syndicats, comme ce fut le cas aux États-Unis. Au contraire, il s'est fait beaucoup de consultation dans un effort pour obtenir une coopération plus grande en vue de la solution des problèmes d'ordre économique. Bien qu'il y ait eu un certain nombre de «négociations à la baisse», cela s'est produit moins fréquemment qu'aux États-Unis. Même si cela a l'air d'un paradoxe, on a vu aussi aux États-Unis une augmentation de la coopération entre employeurs et syndicats au cours des dernières années, principalement de la part d'employeurs qui ont choisi de ne pas adopter une attitude agressive envers leurs syndicats.

Par participation formelle directe, on entend le remodelage du profil des tâches, la mise sur pied de groupes de travail semi-autonomes et les cercles de qualité. Ce sont certainement les cercles de qualité qui ont connu la plus forte popularité. Cependant, comparativement au reste de l'Europe et à l'Amérique du Nord, les expériences en matière de remodelage des tâches furent très limitées en Grande-Bretagne.

En ce qui concerne la participation informelle, il semble qu'il y ait eu progression vers une attitude plus coopérative de la part des employeurs, surtout dans les industries nouvelles. Cependant, le développement le plus marqué est attribuable à une augmentation de la popularité des régimes d'actionnariat ouvrier et de participation aux bénéfices, surtout en Amérique du Nord, mais aussi en Grande-Bretagne et dans d'autres pays de l'Europe de l'Ouest. L'Europe a également connu une augmentation considérable des coopératives ouvrières, notamment en France et en Italie.

Dans l'ensemble, on a remarqué que les différentes formes de participation ouvrière sont devenues plus populaires et qu'elles ont été de mieux en mieux acceptées pendant la dernière décennie tant en Grande-Bretagne qu'en Europe de l'Ouest et en Amérique du Nord, surtout en ce qui a trait à celles qui favorisaient la collaboration et la coopération à l'intérieur des entreprises. Plutôt que d'avoir été une occasion de tenter d'attaquer et de démolir les mécanismes de participation déjà en place (surtout ceux qui fonctionnaient en collaboration avec les syndicats), la dernière récession a agi comme un catalyseur en vue de la création de nouvelles structures de manière à mettre en valeur de façon plus directe la participation ouvrière. Par-dessus tout, les faits semblent indiquer que les approches basées sur le « cliquet évolutif » (Brannen, 1983) ou sur les « conjonctures favorables » (Poole, 1983) visant à conceptualiser les tendances vers la participation ont reçu plus d'appui que le concept « cyclique » adopté par Ramsay (1977, 1983) qui ne reconnaît pas les changements énormes qui se sont produits dans les milieux social, technologique et économique depuis plus d'un siècle.

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**SPECIAL ISSUE: "LABOUR LEADERSHIP IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE"**

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Andrew F. Johnson

K. W. Schweizer

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