

## Supervisors: Workers or Management?

Mike Sarakinsky & Paul Crankshaw

This article is an analysis of the dispute (1) which took place in a Germiston chemical factory last year, over the question of whether supervisors in the factory should be regarded as part of the workforce or as part of management. It raises interesting questions regarding structural definitions of class, particularly with respect to the boundary between the "new middle class" and the working class. This article is based on a series of interviews held with a shop steward, a supervisor, the personnel manager (a white male), the labour officer (a black male) and a union organiser.

The company in question produces cosmetics, perfumes and toiletries, and employs approximately 300 black workers, 11 of whom are supervisors. The ratio of semi-skilled/unskilled to skilled workers is in the region of 3:1. (According to the personnel manager, an unskilled worker's job requires 1 day's training.) Workers are divided into 4 wage grades: A and B (skilled), C (semi-skilled), and D (unskilled). These grades were originally negotiated with the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU), and now serve as the basis for wage negotiations between the union and the company. According to the personnel manager, about 99% of the black workers belong to the union, including the black supervisors. The reason why the supervisors are members of the union was because, under the terms of the original recognition agreement, all non-managerial staff were eligible to join: however, the category of "managerial" staff was not clearly defined. Supervisors, therefore, were not unambiguously excluded from joining the union. However, in 1984, when the recognition agreement was being renegotiated, management tried to exclude supervisors from eligibility for union membership by defining them as part of management. A conflict over this issue ensued between management and the union. The terms of the agreement reached

- supervisors -

were that supervisors could remain members of the union but could only be represented in grievance procedures. The union could not negotiate on their behalf.

Supervisors then, unlike workers, fall under the management grading scheme. While workers are paid weekly at an hourly rate, supervisors are paid monthly, directly into a bank account. The company is in the process of setting up a training programme for supervisors, but it is not yet in operation. The official production hierarchy runs from a production manager, to a foreman, to the supervisors, to the workers.

### Theories of class

In the theoretical literature on class, the position of supervisors is a source of some debate. In orthodox Marxist theory, capitalist societies are defined in terms of a bi-polar class model: owners of means of production (bourgeoisie), and non-owners (proletarian) (2). Supervisors, as non-owners, would consequently form part of the latter. Poulantzas, however, places supervisors unambiguously into the "new petit-bourgeoisie", which he defines in terms of a failure to qualify in all three of the strict conditions he lays down for membership of the working class. The members of the new petit-bourgeoisie are, in these terms, unproductive workers (not directly involved in material production), and/or those holding a supervisory or managerial position of any sort (involved in the control of the labour process, including the utilisation of labour power), and/or those possessing a skill or amount of information about the production process to which the direct producers do not have access (eg. engineers, accountants). (3)

In a critique of Poulantzas, Wright argues that instead of each and every occupational position being unambiguously categorised into one or another class, one could regard certain positions as occupying "objectively contradictory locations within class relations", or "contradictory class locations". He defines classes according to their particular position in relation to control over the physical means of production, control over labour power, and control

over investment and utilisation of profits. These locations could be stated primarily as:

1. managers and supervisors - situated between the bourgeoisie and proletariat
2. semi-autonomous employees (eg. engineers, accountants) - situated between the proletariat and petty bourgeoisie
3. small employers (eg. shopkeepers) - between the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie (4)

While not overtly discussing class, non-Marxist writers such as Piron, Human and Rajah also recognise the ambivalent position of supervisors vis-a-vis management and workers. (5) They describe the supervisor as experiencing "a great deal of role conflict and role ambiguity (or marginality) within his everyday life". (6) They explain the marginality of supervisors in this way: "Black supervisors are caught in a no man's land not only between the cultural groups but also between more senior level management and workers". (7)

While we are not here concerned with the respective merits of any of the above theories, they shed light on why the position of supervisors is becoming increasingly contested.

#### A CASE STUDY

This section will focus on some disjunctures between the views of the personnel manager, the labour officer, and the workforce regarding aspects of the labour process and the position of supervisors.

#### The chain of command: the relationship of supervisors to both workers and management

As was mentioned earlier, the official hierarchy within the factory is headed by a production manager, whose responsibilities range from monitoring inputs and outputs of materials and products to implementing formal disciplinary procedures to solving minor disputes in the factory. Beneath him is a foreman, who acts as an intermediary between him and the supervisors. The supervisors must follow the

- supervisors -

production plan as instructed by the production manager, although they have some autonomy as to how they implement this plan. This involves mental rather than manual labour, according to the personnel manager:

We once cautioned a supervisor who was in fact working on the lines himself. We don't want him to actually stand with the packers or machine operators and work on the lines. His job is in fact to supervise and to manage rather than to do.

According to management, the powers of supervisors include:

1. issuing verbal reprimands
2. stopping the lines for safety reasons
3. allowing or disallowing workers to leave the lines for short periods
4. deciding to speed up the lines
5. monitoring quotas
6. allocating tasks amongst the workforce and monitoring their execution

When asked whether supervisors were aware of the extent and limits of their power, the personnel manager replied:

They certainly are, although they weren't eighteen months ago...They have been repeatedly told that they are responsible for the people under their control, and we keep on reinforcing this all the time...

He perceived there to be a high level of conflict between supervisors and workers, and expressed concern at the inability and/or disinclination of supervisors to perform their jobs adequately "for fear of being got on the train on the way home. They are concerned about their popularity rather than doing their job. They often put their jobs on the line rather than take action against the workforce". This has created a tension in the relationship between managers and supervisors because management, while acknowledging their problems, is not prepared to accept the situation: "They get paid to do a job and we expect it to be done".

The labour officer, while agreeing that there is a degree of conflict between workers and supervisors, suggests that the real source of management's dissatisfaction with super-

visors is the latter's incompetence:

The quality of supervisors we have promoted to that position might not be the right quality. They are not really trainable. They cannot handle problems. They have never had sufficient exposure to management training courses.

He pointed to a divergence between the way in which the production hierarchy should work in theory and the way it works in practice:

Supervisors regard shop stewards as senior to themselves. Shop stewards should report to supervisors as their immediate bosses but that is not happening. What is happening is that they have given shop stewards the upper hand because they [shop stewards] deal with management at an executive level.

The formal production hierarchy dictates that supervisors regard the foreman and production manager as their immediate superiors, and that all problems (including discipline) should be taken to them. However, as members of the union, supervisors regard shop stewards as their superiors, and they try and solve all disciplinary problems through them. This reflects the strength of the union amongst the workforce. The labour officer put it this way, "We admit we were beaten by the mere fact that we had to recognise the union."

Supervisors don't perceive themselves as having any powers: "I don't believe we've got powers", said one supervisor.

"If I've got a problem, I'm supposed to refer to the foreman. Then he is supposed to refer to the production manager." But in practice, as the labour officer noted, the procedure is different. According to a shop steward:

If any problems arise, the supervisors come to the shop stewards before they go to the foreman. They discuss the problem with the shop stewards, who try and solve the problem with the workers concerned.

Shop stewards are aware of the potential for conflict between workers and supervisors, and how this could weaken the collective strength of the workforce:

- supervisors -

We are trying to remove conflict between workers and supervisors. We tell our members they must respect their supervisors, and supervisors must respect the workers.

"Black Advancement": the contradiction between "promotion from within" and managerial control

In response to the Sullivan Code, the company adopted a policy of "Affirmative Action" of which the policy of "Black Advancement" became a part (8). This is defined by the personnel manager as a programme aimed at the progression of blacks up the managerial structure. Some of the reasons put forward by the company's personnel department for instituting the programme are as follows:

1. the removal of "social injustice" in the form of job discrimination
2. to promote industrial and political stability through the encouragement of a black middle class (supervisors, defined by the company as part of the management structure, are included in their definition of this class)
3. to alleviate the national shortage of management personnel, as well as that within the company. This, together with the need to counter the disinvestment lobby, "are related to the company's future in South Africa" and are motivated "primarily [by] self-interest". (9)

More generally, we would tentatively suggest that the emergence of black supervisors coincides with the emergence of the independent trade union movement; viewed in this light, policies of black advancement would seem to represent attempts by management to divide and co-opt sections of the black workforce to retain control over industrial relations and the labour process. In line with "scientific management" principles, attempts are made to further remove control of the labour process from direct producers by extending management influence on the shop-floor in the form of compliant supervisors.

But the policy of black advancement contains a potential contradiction, one which has manifest itself in this instance. The labour officer put it thus:

You can imagine, if you have been working with guys for years and then all of a sudden they promote you senior to them; the guys are used to your habits, they know all your weaknesses. So for you to now change and immediately say "Gents, I want you to listen to me. I am now your boss." Its just a mere waste of time. The position of supervisor is a critical position. I would say rather than promoting a guy from within, you'd rather recruit a guy from outside, who's not known by any of the guys.

He is supported in his view by the personnel manager:  
If they don't do their jobs properly, we'll have to get people who won't be intimidated, or who don't live in the same township, or who belong to a different race group.

Black advancement, then, while presenting potential advantages to the company, at the same time introduces potential risks for opening up "space" in which the union can operate.

#### Supervisors: workers or management?

The ambiguous position of supervisors is well illustrated by the different perceptions of their position, by workers, management, and supervisors themselves.

According to the personnel manager, the criteria for promotion to the position of supervisor include:

1. "they must stand out from the rest of the workforce"
2. they must be "co-operative"
3. they must have an ability to "communicate" with both management and workers
4. they must be "natural leaders"
5. they must be recommended by the production manager

The personnel manager defines supervisors as part of management because their job entails management of workers, as well as planning, organising and controlling the labour process. Supervisors are "white collar" workers and are therefore on the management grading scheme. However, he says:

- supervisors -

I think they see themselves as part of the workforce rather than as part of management and this is a very big problem area.

In his view, the reason why supervisors don't see themselves as part of management, and why workers don't see them as part of management, is because they (the supervisors) are black. If the supervisors were white, the workers would see them as part of management. This he sees as contradicting the union policy of non-racialism.

The labour officer suggests that workers see supervisors as part of the workforce because they are members of the union. If they were not members, they would be regarded as management. The reason why the union accepted supervisors, he said, was purely in order to boost their membership. Also, the workers and supervisors saw the union as a "black organisation" and therefore accepted all blacks as members.

Workers and supervisors are most emphatic that no amount of management talk will convince them that supervisors are part of management. A supervisor said:

We were promoted from the lines, we know what it is all about. We know the difficulties on the lines from long ago, so we can't just shout at a man. I don't feel I'm part of management.

Management tried unsuccessfully to prevent supervisors from working the lines, as one supervisor said:

But we told them that it's not easy just to stand and look while other people are working. If somebody needs to leave the line for an hour or two, you can't block him. So I've got to go on the line and help that guy.

Management is extremely unhappy about this situation. One clause in the recognition agreement stipulated by management, is that supervisors cannot become shop stewards.

#### Management strategy to isolate supervisors

The personnel manager said, "they (the supervisors) don't

accept that they are different from them (the workers) but we are trying to change their perception". He believes there has been minimal success so far in these attempts, but:

Recently they have been sitting separately at lunch time and possibly this is a result of the input management has been giving them. I hope that is the case.

The labour officer puts the "mistrust of management's motives" at the centre of his explanation of the behaviour of supervisors and workers in joining the union:

Most companies believe that all blacks go for the unions; they reckon that every black man likes seeing himself as a member of a union. I am totally against that; it is not true! There are reasons that make people join the union and basically they are: simply because of the lack of security. If management played its part as a human resource, I don't think any of the guys would have gone for the union, because they're quite aware of the union's weaknesses. The union is only concerned with selling itself to employees by saying, "We will protect you". Although the workers might be aware of the company's benefits being greater than what the union can offer, they still feel, because of the mistrust they have in management, their only alternative is to go for the union.

This mistrust is because, firstly, management is seen as "white", and secondly, because management is not providing the benefits which it should, he explained.

The workers and supervisors see the attempts by management to draw supervisors away from the rest of the workers as "intimidation". A supervisor told us:

We had a meeting of only supervisors with the personnel manager. He told us it was not wise for us to join in or participate in the union because we are no more workforce, we are management. He said if we resign from the union he will pay us more. What he is giving us now is peanuts, but we told him: "No, we will keep our peanuts." Even if we get R3000 for one month, we can still be fired or victimised. We did not resign [from our union].

- supervisors -

A shop steward supported this statement:

He [the personnel manager] wanted to divide the workers at the company. He wanted to create a division and a conflict between supervisors and workers. So what we have done is try and prevent this happening by telling our supervisors and workers they must respect each other.

He explained further:

He wanted supervisors to victimise workers so he could weaken the union. They are using black against black. We have realised this and that's why supervisors disagree to resign from the union.

It is clear that it is management policy to try to differentiate the workforce. According to the shop stewards, the issue of supervisors' membership of the union arose out of the dispute over the unfair dismissal of an Indian supervisor, who was a member of the union. The Industrial Court ruled in favour of the supervisor concerned. It was as a result of this that the personnel manager wanted to renegotiate the terms "non-managerial/managerial" staff in the recognition agreement.

### Conclusion

There are a number of objective influences overdetermining the class identity of supervisors in this particular case study. We have isolated the following (there may well be others which have not been revealed in this short study):

- strength of organisation within the factory. Almost all of the black workforce belong to the union, with a few white women also considering membership.
- the policy of promotion from within tends to create supervisors who share common workplace and social experiences with other workers.
- both supervisors and other workers tend to come from the same residential townships (ie. Natalspruit/Katlehong) and socialise together.
- both supervisors and other workers share a common racial identity.
- the supervisors have occupied their positions for a relatively short period of time, during which their exposure

- to management perceptions has been limited.
- as yet, the company has not implemented a training scheme for supervisors.
  - the overt attempts by management to differentiate supervisors from workers seems only to have increased their suspicion of management as well as their general feelings of job insecurity.

This case study would seem to indicate limitations to attempts to define the new middle class in purely structural terms. We have seen how conflict has emerged over the identity of the job category, "supervisor", and the range of influences on the perceptions of incumbents of this position. If we see class as a set of relationships rather than a thing or category, then it is these relationships which need to be concretely investigated. They cannot simply be read off from individuals' particular places within economic or political structures.

This case study points to the necessity for a distinction to be made between class structure and class identity with regard to the "new middle class" or the "new petty bourgeoisie" or the "contradictory class locations" (whatever one chooses to call them) with the class identity being open to conjunctural analysis.

#### Footnotes:

- 1 We do not use "dispute" in the strictly legal sense, ie. referring to industrial confrontation which has gone to the level of the Industrial Court, but simply in the sense of a disagreement between management and the union which gave rise to high level negotiations between the two.
- 2 For a brief overview of this position, see E Olin Wright, "Varieties of Marxist conceptions of class structure", Politics and Society, 9.3, 1980
- 3 N Poulantzas, "On social classes", New Left Review, 78, 1973, pp 27-50; also Classes in contemporary capitalism, (Verso, Great Britain 1979)
- 4 E Olin Wright, "Varieties"; also Class, crisis and the state, (Verso, Great Britain 1983), pp 30-110

- supervisors -

- 5 J Piron, L Human, and M Rajah, "The men in the middle: supervisors in South African organisations today", ASSA conference, Johannesburg, 1984
- 6 *ibid*, p7
- 7 *ibid*, p21
- 8 A M McGregor, "Management development and adult education: putting the theories into practice", (Unpublished abridged version of Honours dissertation, University of the Witwatersrand, 1984), p3
- 9 *ibid*
- 10 Eddie Webster identifies a "crisis of control" during this period in the metal industry. See E Webster, "A new frontier of control? Case studies in the changing form of job control in South African industrial relations", Second Carnegie inquiry into poverty and development in Southern Africa, University of Cape Town, 1984. Our hypothesis is that this "crisis" was not confined to that branch of industry.