

Expanding and Improving Workplace Democracy as a  
Prerequisite for Humanising Labour and the Work Environment  
**DIRECT II**

# **The case study of Direct Participation in the Italian Electrolux establishments**

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# The company

- Electrolux is a Swedish multinational one of the world's leading companies specialized in the production of household appliances
- Worldwide 35 factories (5 in Italy); 47,543 employees (4,611 in Italy)
- For each direct employee, in the Italian factories, at least one other in the supply chain.

# The industrial relations and participatory model

- A participatory «best practice» in the Italian panorama of the industrial relations, since it was Zanussi, till the mid 1990s
- The new Swedish ownership has stimulated the adoption of management models more inspired by participatory approaches to the HRM
- Indirect participation is largely ruled by the national industry agreement: I&C rights, joint committees, observatories for the anticipation of change, including the technological one
- Direct participation: the “5s Technique”, Audit, Team work. Box of suggestion

# The DP in the Electrolux Manufacturing System (EMS)

- **The EMS.** Translation of lean production in the Group; strongly focused on the "full involvement of workers", as well as on "sharing the objectives and their achievement at all levels"
- **The Business Plan Development (BDP)** defines the general objectives and improvement plans, including the annual definition for each site of the "Plan of participatory actions, and related investments, aimed at improving the expected results of the various indicators of productivity, safety, quality, costs, people".
- **EMS Way.** A working methodology based on the concept of operational leadership that provides for the active interaction between the different organizational levels in order to define the improvement objectives and allow each team to work "independently" to achieve them.
- **The "5s Technique"**. It assigns each individual worker the role of controlling the workstation/work area, reporting critical issues or abnormal conditions

# The teamwork

## EMS “Focused Teams”

- Homogeneous groups of workers led by a Team Leader, who periodically share information on the trend of the pertinent indicators, on the conditions and safety standards and identify the corrective actions to be implemented.
- The activities of the Focused Teams take place through meetings, to be held at least once a month, lasting 10-15 minutes in the work areas where each member of the team can provide their own contribution through suggestions, requests for clarification or proposals for improvement. .

# Box of suggestions

- Problem Solving approach, aimed at identifying the cause of a problem and eliminating it permanently
- Possibility for the workers to make suggestions for improvement to the Team Leaders, who evaluate their feasibility
- Through an inter-functional activity, the different teams thus have the opportunity to be an active part in the structured resolution of the problems in their area.

# Technological innovation and working conditions

- With a project called "Genesis", the factory of Susegana has become "the most automated system in the world of the Electrolux system"
- The workers, organized in three shifts, work in groups of small teams and, often equipped with a tablet, communicate with robots and colleagues, the closest of which are a hundred meters away.
- Job enrichment and rotation. In the assembly line workers change positions approximately every hour.
- The metalworkers' right to technological training and digital literacy (DigitalMac)

# The drivers for more participation at work

- The business model
- The management style; the culture with which it is impregnated
- The consequences of the pandemic, which have increased sales and the demand for effort from workers
- the maturation, throughout the Italian trade union, of a convinced choice in support of worker participation in the company.
- Italian tax legislation, since 2016, favors those companies that correlate production bonuses with the adoption of participation plans.

# Criticisms

- for management, the persistence of strong areas of resistance on the part of workers and delegates of some factories.
- DP, related to the paradigms of lean and continuous improvement, can have critical repercussions on work. With relative psycho-physical stress.
- The decision-making power of the workers within the teams remains scarce, even if the workers solicit, with suggestions, possible improvements. Finding no response from the team leaders
- Participation requires mutual trust and stability. In the past, it stopped when the company reacted to the crisis by closing factories and relocating abroad

# The workers and unions viewpoints

- Workers and trade unionists recognize the acceptance of some of their claims in the field of work organization, like the job rotation and enrichment
- For some, the DP represents an additional resource, certainly able to lead to results, convenient for both parties”
- For some others, it is just a way to get more commitment and productivity of workers, without substantially changing working conditions
- For the trade union, the DP must in any case provide for a preliminary involvement of the trade union negotiations, in order to establish the framework, some fundamental rules. Otherwise it risks becoming a subordinate form of involvement, aimed only at integrating workers into the logic and ideology of management, for the sole purpose of preventing and preventing any expression of autonomy and, if necessary, conflict.