

Industrial democracy at work

After working at Willett Foods Limited for only one week, warehouse operator Vic Larose was able to take a week's honeymoon at full salary, reports Janice Middleton in *The Citizen*.

It was a wedding present from his co-workers, who each worked a few hours extra, on Vic's behalf. They did not charge overtime.

At most plants, that arrangement would violate union rules. But Willett operates under what employees call a "new and improved" system of management that allows them to participate in decision-making.

Willett Foods, a subsidiary of Dominion Stores that has just opened a new 18 580-square-metre plant in Ottawa's east end with 158 employees and a payroll of \$40 000 a week, is a key player in the great Dominion experiment with quality of worklife programs.

It follows an example set by the food chain's Winnipeg Distribution Centre. Since its opening in December 1978, the centre has achieved 30 to 35 per cent more productivity than other Dominion warehouses.

Winnipeg's success — although it is much smaller with only 27 workers — spurred the company to try it in Ottawa, said Bill Pearce, Dominion's manager of human resources.

"Absenteeism is half the normal rate, and there have been no strikes," he said of the Winnipeg plant.

Willett's general manager Rico Gileno said choosing managers with flexible management styles is crucial because under the quality of worklife system, an authoritative manager is out of place.

It will be several years before the chain goes so far into quality of worklife that it is an integral part of Dominion and its subsidiaries. Dominion now has 262 stores.

Industrial democracy

Meanwhile, there is a concentrated effort by the 158 employees in both the warehouse and office areas to practise industrial democracy. For example:

— When the plant took on 11 more warehouse operators recently, the three operators already on staff interviewed applicants and had a say in who got the jobs.

— Two company truck drivers are now drawing up the routes drivers will take in making pickups and deliveries to Willett's



Drew Gragg, The Citizen

Willett Foods personnel manager Rick Neagle trains workers in teamwork skills during "quality of worklife" sessions which last four days and cost \$24 000.

1 500 clients. This is a job that was formerly under management's jurisdiction.

— The office workers hold weekly staff meetings with supervisors, drawing up their own shift schedules. In some cases, they can choose their tasks.

— When a new employee is hired at Willett, the company spends the first four days briefing him on corporate strategy, operations, working conditions and the principles of quality of worklife. The next three weeks are spent in skill training. The end result is that new employees become familiar with the plant and "are as good as anybody who has been on the job for ten years", general manager Rico Gileno said.

— There is an effort to make all employees feel they contribute equally. There's no executive diningroom at this plant.

"We all eat together," said Gileno.

Canada's labour record and productivity puts it at the bottom of the list of industrialized countries. Disputes between management and workers are costing the country billions of dollars and millions of hours.

Since 1975, federal and provincial governments have been promoting quality of worklife in both the private and public sectors through grants. The Ontario government provides free quality of worklife consulting to corporations while the federal government provides seed

money up to a maximum of \$30 000. The employment and immigration ministry also provides recruiting services and screens job applicants for companies like Willett that are experimenting with the concept.

In 1981, the federal government announced \$1.1 million a year in grants for five years. Labour Canada has eight field workers watching over the programs from regional offices in Moncton, Montreal, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver.

Other Canadian companies that are implementing quality of life programs are Shell Canada, Steinberg, Canadian General Electric and Air Canada.

Willett truck drivers Ray Derouchie and Mike Joannis, who together have 24 years of experience in moving merchandise across country, are convinced the project will succeed.

Planning the routes for the company's 12 Ottawa-based drivers — their fellow workers — "gives you the feeling you have a stake in the company", Derouchie said. "We're going to push ourselves rather than have management do it," they said.

With open lines of communication, friction between factions is easier to cool out. Willett's collective agreement with its Ottawa unionized employees has shrunk from 160 to six pages, Gileno points out. "Problems don't usually come to a grievance," he said.