

European Car Industry : Creating cross-border links between militants

lundi 10 octobre 2011, par [PELLETIER Robert](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 29 mai 2011).

On Saturday and Sunday May 27-28, 2011, about thirty trade-union and political activists from the car industry, coming from the Spanish State, the United States, France, Italy, Poland, Russia and Sweden, met on the initiative of the “August 80” Free Trade Union of Poland at the International Institute for Research and Education (IIRE) in Amsterdam, to compare their analyses and experiences in the industry. It adopted a statement published on ESSF [1].

The participants represented their trade-union organizations (“August 80” in Poland, the CGT and STM-Intersindical Valenciana in the Spanish State, the Inter-regional Trade Union of Car Workers of Russia, IF Metall from Volvo-Truck in Umea (Sweden), their associations (Autoworkers’ Caravan from the United States) or their political parties (the Polish Party of Labour, the New Anticapitalist Party from France, Sinistra Critica from Italy). A delegation of the French trade union federation Solidaires-Industry took part as observers. The discussions took place in five languages (English, Spanish, French, Italian and Polish) thanks to the voluntary help of interpreters who were themselves activists. A declaration was adopted at the conclusion of the discussions.

The meeting took place against the background of major reorganizations in the industry, with lay-offs and the closure of sites and at the moment when the mobilization of the “indignant ones” was developing in Spain.

We present below a summary of the exchanges between militants of the various enterprises present at the Amsterdam meeting, following on the introductory report.

Renault Cléon, France (NPA) : In our factory there are 4500 workers who manufacture transmission belts and engines. At Renault, working conditions are getting worse and the pressure on workers is increasing, with more and more harassment, and there have been some suicides. Renault is trying to get out of the “crisis” by making workers accept worse conditions, by “breaking” workers’ combativeness. Renault is increasing relocations, investments in countries known as “low cost” and increasing the pressure on workers with the argument : “We are too expensive”. They mean to make workers accept the loss of certain gains with the least possible resistance. For the first time, today, Renault is manufacturing more cars abroad than it does in France. As a result, there is a rise in protectionist reflexes. In the trade unions there are two kinds of ideas, those which tend towards protectionism and those which are opposed to it.

Where things are worst is in the companies which supply parts. We have to create links between the factories ordering these parts and those which supply them, basing ourselves on the example of the

strike at Sealinx which succeeded in blocking a Peugeot factory.

Ford Valencia, Spain (STM-Intersindical Valenciana trade union) : As is the case all over Europe, Toyotism is dividing the working class. Ten years ago, attacks were directed against all the personnel and there were overall responses. Today, the employers do not attack everyone at the same time. That makes it much more difficult to carry out common battles. People are afraid, with very high unemployment (23 per cent, almost 50 per cent among those under 30). Social protection is being seriously undermined. Unemployment benefits are much lower than wages. To be unemployed makes it impossible to pay your rent or get credit. The banks then take back your house, sell it at a price much lower than the purchase price and thus consider that the credit has not been refunded ! Workers find themselves homeless and are still in debt... In that situation it is enormously difficult to mobilize workers who are afraid of finding themselves unemployed.

At Ford, there is a big “treacherous” trade union, the UGT, with 75 per cent of the workforce ! To be in this trade union gives you advantages : promotion, getting a better work post for health reasons. After workers have taken early retirement, there is hiring, but in fact the UGT controls it. If a worker wants to get someone in their family taken on, they have to join the UGT. The bosses are trying to have the canteen closed at night. Workloads have increased, and with the worsening of working conditions, there is an increase in musculoskeletal disorders. The new recruits do not have the same conditions as the old ones. Despite all these attacks, at the last elections of union delegates in February, the UGT maintained its position.

FESIM-CGT, Trade Union, Spain : The crisis in Spain has not been only a crisis of overproduction but also a crisis of speculation with attacks against workers’ rights over 25 years. Legislation has been constantly modified, in particular to make it easier to sack workers. At Nissan, there have been three agreements in three successive years to freeze wages while increasing productivity. By referendum, supported by the UGT (the CGT and CCOO unions were opposed), the workers accepted a worsening of working conditions and a cut in wages for two years in exchange for production of a new model. There are also attacks against pensions (the retirement age has been raised to 67), against health (loss of treatment), education (development of the private sector and parents paying more and more). So wages are attacked directly, but also indirectly through driving down social services.

There are nevertheless attempts to resist. At present there are big demonstrations. In the factories workers are in retreat but in the street, young people and workers are coming out to demonstrate. It is perhaps the beginning of resistance on a wider scale.

LEAR Corporation, Italy (Sinistra Critica), (supplier for FIAT in Turin) : In the 1990s there was a relocation of most of the suppliers, used by FIAT to reorganize outsourcing and thus to impose a reduction of costs. The suppliers compensated by cutting wages and subcontracting out to even smaller companies. The manufacture of car seats was thus transferred from Turin to Portugal then to Poland, where social conditions are worse. The methods of blackmail imposed in FIAT were also utilised by suppliers. Working conditions have got worse. The three big trade-union confederations have made agreements with the employers and the government in order to lower wages and worsen working conditions, for greater productivity. We are going towards the elimination of national collective bargaining agreements, which are being replaced by negotiations at company level. In exchange for these “accepted” retreats, the employers promise recognition of the unions, which would deal with education and training, social security, hiring. We are going towards trade unions which are tools at the service of the employers. As a result, the CGIL, the largest trade union, is racked by internal conflicts while the government continues to dismantle working-class gains.

Volvo-Truck, Umea, Sweden (IF Metall trade union) : There is a similar situation in the Swedish

trade unions. A right-wing government for six years has changed the situation : modification of the law on work contracts, short-term contracts, sickness leave. The government is hand in hand with the employers. For industrial workers, there exists only one trade union, led by the social democrats. It is very difficult to create an opposition in the union, whose leaders want to accompany the employers in the framework of the crisis. Many people are leaving the union. Before, 75 per cent of the workers were in the union, now the percentage is considerably reduced.

In Volvo, working conditions have changed, and so have collective agreements. There are short-term contracts, and there is a lot of subcontracting with fewer rights. The employers organize production with a great deal of flexibility, thus being able to move production from one factory to another in the event of a strike. There are laws which facilitate sackings ; there are fewer and fewer permanent contracts. Working conditions are not too bad in general, even though what is happening here resembles what is happening elsewhere. There has not yet been a frontal attack against collective bargaining agreements.

Ford Bordeaux, France (NPA) : The Ford factory in Blanquefort near Bordeaux has been manufacturing gear boxes since 1973. It employed up to 2500 workers. In the course of its European reorganizations, Ford decided to sell this factory to a German group, HZ Holding. The factory was to continue to produce for Ford, who would become a customer of the new owners. In fact, no industrial project was developed and this takeover was limited to a simple financial transaction, collecting along the way subsidies from the public authorities. In Blanquefort, under the leadership of the CGT union in the factory, we fought to maintain our jobs in the factory rather than for redundancy payments.

A long battle began, with unequal support from the other trade unions. This fight was also a demonstration of the transparency of all discussions. Thus, negotiations were always conducted with the workers kept informed, and with their support. The disappearance of the factory would have had negative effects extending well beyond just the workers of the factory and the fight was not confined within its limits. A local support collective was set up as a way of mobilizing, involving workers, their families and all the organizations of the Left. The government was also challenged. At the time of two “World Motor Shows” in 2008 and 2010, several hundred workers and their families “went up” to Paris to make their demands heard.

This mobilization led to a first result, on January 1, 2011, when Ford Europe bought the factory back. But we haven’t won yet, because no serious commitment to an activity that would ensure continued employment was made. Without transforming themselves into economic or industrial experts, the members of the union are demanding the implementation of a “structuring” industrial project. On May 6, 2011, Ford Europe announced investments that would make it possible to maintain nearly a thousand jobs on the site. Nothing has been definitively won and these employers’ promises will become reality only at the price of continuing our mobilization.

PSA Madrid, Spain (CGT trade union) : It was an old Simca factory, at the time of Chrysler (lorries, tractors...), bought by PSA involving a deterioration of activity. There were production losses, the number of workers employed fell from 16,000 to 2,825 and so it was more difficult to fight, in spite of big mobilizations at the time of the fall of the dictatorship. In the 1980s, when working conditions were worsening, the trade unions took part in these retreats and changed nature. Mobilizations have become more difficult. There have been many cases of stress, anguish and psychosocial problems as a result of a reorganization of work which has resulted in additional pressures, an increasing workload and a reduction of the workforce.

FIAT Tychy Poland, (“August 80” Free Trade Union) : The employers proposed an agreement on flexibilisation of working time with an organization of work they called flexible and our union

refused to sign. This led to attacks against us : pressures, convocations, blackmail regarding jobs, blackmail of militants... Some workers left the union following these pressures. The employers then took the union to court. The factory inspectorate noted violations of the law, but that did not have any consequences. The "August 80" Free Trade Union is the most combative ; the other two unions "are more or less bought". The number of trade union members is falling and financially it is becoming difficult. The owner hires "false" workers to spy on the militants and take notes. There are spontaneous reactions of workers who can no longer put up with the conditions : the office of a union that is the most submissive to the employers was ransacked by workers, several hundred cars were sabotaged... Many workers were laid off to create a climate of terror, to prevent resistance. It is a real policy aimed at reducing the audience of the combative trade unions. During the two last years, the factory beat all the records of production and profitability. But wages do not increase. Individual contracts are increasing, which goes in the direction of the destruction of collective links, collective agreements and at the end of the day collective consciousness. But we stay confident even though today we must face blackmail : "If you behave yourselves, perhaps you will have more work, if not it is the end of the factory". The room for manoeuvre for the unions who are accomplices of management has been reduced enormously. Their policy also plays against them ; they will end up by becoming useless to the employers, who want to liquidate trade unionism in a brutal fashion.

GM Opel Gliwice, Poland, ("August 80" Free Trade Union) : We have also had to face attempts to destroy the trade unions with a policy of terror towards workers and threats of dismissals. Everything is done to prevent workers from taking part in union meetings (breakdowns of the entry gate, etc) and fewer people come to the meetings. The employers impose wage moderation, make savings on the health of the workers and increase the use of short-term contracts and subcontracting. If the worker protests, his contract is not renewed. The "Solidarnosc" union at Opel Gliwice "has sold itself", has become an accomplice of management. It criticizes the initiatives of the "August 80" union and says that disputes weaken the company.

Renault Rueil, France (NPA) (Engineering Centre, 3 to 4,000 engineers and executives) : A worsening of working conditions (Individualization, breaking down of work collectives) which has resulted in six suicides in recent years in the biggest engineering centre, in Guyancourt (10,000 workers). In the small factories of the industry, the employers' offensive results in lay-offs. In the big ones, it results in attacks on social gains. Hard struggles such as that at Continental do not prevent closures, but make it possible to obtain conditions of redundancy that are less bad than elsewhere. The problem is the absence of coordination of struggles. The employers have an advantage by having only to isolate the combative trade unions, while drawing trade unionists into a multiplicity of meetings so as to divert them from fighting back.

Renault Valladolid, Spain (CGT trade union) : The current situation dates from 2009, after the fight against the possible closure of the site. The company promised work until 2013, with an agreement for a new vehicle, signed by the unions without a struggle. The electric vehicle is a hope for the workers because there would be big sales. But with no guarantee concerning jobs. Management relies on certain trade unions to develop productivity : modification of working conditions without negotiation. Lay-offs and disciplinary measures are increasing as the company replaces workers on permanent contracts by hiring precarious workers, freezes wages and develops flexibility, increased overtime and weekend work. This policy tends to discredit the trade unions. The majority unions do not say anything even if they are attacked and the workers no longer believe in the unions. There is no more social collective and we are seeing a rise of individualism.

Solidaires-Industry, France (observers) : The attacks over working time are increasing, but because of the weight of unemployment, resistance is difficult. Individual resistance exists, but isolation sometimes leads to suicide, as at the Technocentre in Guyancourt (Parisian region).

Volkswagen, Russia (Interregional Trade union of Carworkers) : Development of precarious work and wage cuts. Two types of factory in Russia : those which come from the USSR and those built by multinationals (Ford, GM...). In the old factories, there are the old trade unions which have kept their structures and are very close to management. It is practically impossible there to build independent trade unions and we failed in this task. The independent trade unionists who tried often ended up by selling out. In the new factories, the multinational owners make enormous profits. There is also persecution of independent trade unions. Every time an independent trade union is established, a yellow trade union is also established. This makes it possible to create a facade. Many leaflets are declared illegal and are prohibited, and sometimes we are taken to court. Any independent organization is declared to be extremist.

Autoworkers' Caravan, United States : In 1999, there were 379,000 workers in GM, as against 19,000 today. The reorganization of work involves cutting the workforce, the development of precarious contracts, subcontracting. Workers suffer a lot from stress because of the increased workload. The UAW (Union of Auto Workers) is undemocratic. In the 1980s, many companies such as Toyota and Mercedes came and established themselves in the country, without trade unions. The big enterprises in Detroit (Chrysler, Ford, GM) sold subcontracting activities to suppliers who had to deal with the payment of pensions. It is a place for experimentation in changes of working conditions. There are two levels of wages, the old ones and the new ones, and the reimbursement of health costs is much less. According to the law, only 20 per cent of workers must be in the new system, but the employers always push to go further. This creates divisions, tensions and reproaches between old and new workers. Labour costs in the transplanted companies are much lower than with the big three. The unions have played a big role in the creation of this division and in the retreats imposed. They have undertaken not to strike between now and 2015 and have accepted wage cuts. The unions at Ford are the only ones not to have accepted this agreement. There is a group of trade unionists who organize the "carworkers' caravan" and who refuse to follow the way the unions are evolving.

FIAT-Mirafiori, Turin, Italy (Sinistra Critica) : With the referendum, a very dangerous employers' policy of blackmail is developing. The referendum means that we do not need the trade unions, that things can be decided directly with the workers. In the same vein, there is the spread of negotiations with individuals before hiring. That tends to eliminate, little by little, the role of the unions, the role of the collective and to isolate workers. If we do not manage to create bridges, collaboration, we will inevitably lose out against the multinationals. A defeat costs us a lot because the employers will be able to make defeats known but not working-class victories like that at Ford in France. In all these attacks, the "yellow" trade unions are accomplices, but they too will lose their positions and that could open up perspectives. Faced with these new forms of attacks by the employers, we have no other way than that which consists of establishing cross-border links and collaboration between militants. That is what we try to do at FIAT, between the Italian and Polish factories. We have to build ways of cooperating, to popularize these ideas, to establish a common platform of demands.

Seat Barcelona, Spain (CGT) : Today, to get hired and to become a trade unionist is almost impossible. The trade unions are discredited... and the discredit of the unions that submit to the employers affects even those which are combative. Young people no longer see the union as necessary, and think that you can more easily fight in the street. But in the street, you do not attack the wealth of the companies. We have to fight against the employers, every day, on the job. Resistance exists every day, in one form or another. Combative trade unionists need to meet, to set up a network which makes it possible to act as soon as the workers of a factory are in difficulty, to develop solidarity.

FIAT-Mirafiori, Turin, Italy (Sinistra Critica) : FIAT proposes an investment plan for 10,000

workers in Mirafiori, plus 30,000 in subcontracting. This is not an industrial plan, but an attack on working conditions : very heavy physical loads, suppression of the ten-minute pause. Out of 5,500 workers in the body shop, 1,500 are sick (musculoskeletal disorders of the hand in particular). The new work methods will cause an increase in occupational diseases while in parallel there are attacks against sick-leave. Management demands that the trade unions sign this agreement, which provides that neither the unions nor the workers will strike. There will be individual contracts to sign for new employees, but also for the old ones. This plan was refused by the workers and the referendum was won only thanks to executives and to white-collar workers who do not experience working conditions on the conveyor belt. There was resistance to this blackmail, workers wanted to say no to it. It was almost a success and we challenged the agreement in the courts. Now other companies want to impose agreements like the one at FIAT. We have to continue to fight so that workers do not sign.

Ford Valencia, Spain (STM Intersindical Valenciana trade union) : The attacks by the government are increasing : a cut in pensions of 20 per cent, easier sackings, wage cuts for civil servants and deterioration of public services. Through giving “presents” to the wealthiest, the state has less income. There are many industrial accidents which are hidden. Concerning early retirements in the factory, the employer attacked once, failed, then started again and made a success of it this time, but with an agreement which was a little less bad : 1,000 young people could be taken on with permanent and not precarious contracts. We have to establish a network that is not only useful for sending messages. When we went to Ford Bordeaux, we returned home full of enthusiasm and that gave us strength to carry on.

Solidaires-Industry, France (observers) : In defending jobs, we have to refuse demands with nationalist connotations. Relocations are not the fundamental reason for redundancies and closures of sites. Reorganization-dismantling of big industrial structures through the development of subcontracting is just as responsible for the destruction of jobs. So it is all the more criticisable to fight against relocations. Ecological arguments cannot constitute a precondition for saving jobs.

Renault Cléon, France (NPA) : The employers need a trade unionism of accompaniment to get their cutting of labour costs accepted. Threats of relocation and blackmail referendums are increasing. We have to develop links between militants outside our own workplaces.

NPA, France : Trade unions like the CGIL in Italy or the CGT in France no longer have any space to negotiate compromises by basing themselves on struggles. The role of governments is being reduced, while remaining politically important, whether at Renault-Nissan or FIAT-Chrysler. PSA and Volkswagen remain mainly anchored in their country of origin, even though they have international strategies. Relocation is in the first place relocation elsewhere. Resistance should be organized, i.e. defence of jobs, but without choosing what should be produced and by raising the question of another kind of activity.

Sinistra Critica, Italy : The trade unions, including the combative unions, are not reacting quickly enough on the level of international responses. We are acting in a situation of urgency. It was when there was the blackmail at Mirafiori that we contacted the comrades of FIAT Poland, but we are late. Previously there was common FIAT/Seat work, but it disappeared. The FIOM is still able to resist. After having accepted class collaboration, the FIOM fought and won battles... but it lost the war, of which the attack at FIAT is the illustration. The factory in Sicily will close. The factory of Pomigliano and also Mirafiori (14,000 workers, as against 60,000 twenty years ago) should close because, in fact, it is Chrysler that is swallowing FIAT. It was possible to win, to resist, but we lost because of the low number of working days, in particular in the body shop. Within the class, there are trade unions that are allies of the bourgeoisie. They are useful for the employers today, but what about tomorrow ? The FIOM does not have an international strategy commensurate with the attacks at FIAT and even more widely, because there is no solution at the national level. We must defend the

need for the reduction of working time to confront over- capacity and over-equipment. Today we are beginning to establish links and start resistance. It is not up to us, as trade unionists, as workers, to say what we should produce when the question of reconversion is posed, the question of the role of the state in industrialization.

NPA, France : The idea that there are no more collective agreements is progressing quickly, more or less quickly depending on the countries concerned, which challenges even the “yellow” trade unions. The growing concern is perhaps financialisation : Renault, whose headquarters is in the Netherlands, no longer has anything to do with being the national manufacturer, “the Company”. The attacks against workers have a direct effect on the Stock Exchange, which sees them as a sign of good management. We have lost time in common international work in, particular on the question of wages. We have to conduct battles for simple, unifying demands, in order to start to build up a network, even starting from the small reality of today.

Ford Blanquefort, France (NPA) : The battle for jobs is difficult because it appears not very credible to save the factory, since it seems impossible to counter the employers’ strategies, especially those of the multinationals. There was also sometimes ambiguity on the part of the trade union officials, who explained that we need an industrial project in order to save a factory. Our project consists of saving all jobs and affirming that is up to Ford to find solutions. The idea of “getting out of the factory” is unavoidable, it is the way to find perspectives, hope of changing the situation. The question of secondary employment (subcontracting, indirect jobs) makes it possible to establish the link with outside, with the population, with local councillors, because our jobs are linked to other people’s jobs. From the first demonstration in the town, we were determined to make ourselves understood by the media, the elected representatives and the population. We also established links with trade unionists involved in struggles, initially in Bordeaux, then beyond. Every time it filled us with enthusiasm, as the comrade from Ford, Valencia said. Because if we only fight in the factory, our morale depends only on the atmosphere in the factory and so when times are rough, we are less combative. But by looking to the outside and building links, we were able to stay on course in the fight for everyone’s job.

Autoworkers Caravan, United States : I suggest having a document to give an account of the discussions that we have had this weekend. We would need a leaflet on the question of protectionism, and one about the question of subcontracting. Produce a leaflet regularly, every three months, written by comrades who work in various countries. I brought our newspaper “Labor Notes” which speaks about the struggles of workers. This newspaper could perhaps be used as a model, we can exchange information. We are keen to have information on struggles in Europe.

Sinistra Critica, Italy : In Italy, we will try to organize our action on a broader scale. We have up to now been almost exclusively at FIAT Turin. We will try to open a discussion in the FIOM on the need for international links, for an international commitment. We will reinforce our links with our Polish comrades.

Provisional conclusion : All the speakers have insisted on the need for increasing and widening this type of meeting. Other initiatives exist, such as the meeting of the International Council of Car Workers (CITA), which will take place in Munich in May, 2012, with which we should be associated. In the immediate future we must establish regular links between militants and trade-union committees, in order to start to build transnational responses faced with the attacks of the employers of the industry. It is certainly not a question of confining ourselves to our own industry, insofar as the attacks that we are experiencing are part of global policies of the bourgeoisies on the international level. We will start by installing a computer network that makes it possible to have rapid information on mobilizations, to exchange and compare our analyses, and every time that it is possible to give support, to coordinate struggles. Without underestimating the difficulties that relate

on the one hand to the question of languages but also to the disparities of situation and history, it is essential to get down to this task. National meetings involving more enterprises can be the next stage, with the perspective of participation in the CITA meeting.

Robert Pelletier

Robert Pelletier has summarized here notes taken during the meeting by several participants.

P.-S.

* Translation International Viewpoint.

Notes

[1] See ESSF (article 22168) : [Declaration of the European Car Workers' Conference](#).