

Car Industry/France - Ford Blanquefort, an example

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While car bosses in France are on the offensive to eliminate jobs and close factories, the long struggle at the Ford factory near Bordeaux is a counter-example showing that even in this situation, victories are possible. It is no coincidence that one of the main organisers of this struggle in the Ford Blanquefort plant is Philippe Poutou, the activist that the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) has chosen as candidate for the French presidential election of 2012.

The plant was set up by Ford at Blanquefort near Bordeaux in 1973 to manufacture gear boxes. It has employed up to 2,500 employees. In its European restructuring, Ford decided to sell this plant to a German group, HZ Holding, who created First Aquitaine industry. The plant was to continue to produce for Ford which became a customer of the purchaser. In fact, no industrial project was developed and this buyout was limited to a simple financial operation generating government subsidies.

A fatalistic approach would have been to accept the programmed dismantling of the factory and negotiate severance. It is often the solution chosen in the absence of perspectives and sometimes at the instigation of far left activists who prefer to fight for big severance payments rather than for the maintenance of jobs deemed a priori impossible to save. At Blanquefort, at the instigation of the organisers of the CGT union at the factory, this option was not accepted.

A long battle began for the maintenance of all jobs and the placing before its responsibilities of Ford Europe, the principal and still the "client" of the company that it had just sold. This was not a minority battle and all trade unions present in the plant were involved in the action for the maintenance of all jobs. Of course, this unity did not come about without contradiction or opposition, but at each moment of tension it was the mobilization of the vast majority of the employees which imposed the maintenance of unity of action, without downward revision of the demands.

This fight was also a demonstration of transparency in all discussions. In the hours that followed any negotiation, the CGT blog, "Good news" provided an account of the meeting that had taken place. The negotiations were thus always open to the employees. And it is clear that this practice breaks from the bureaucratized methods of too many trade union bodies that use the secrecy of negotiations to endorse demobilizing compromises.

The fight was not confined to the boundaries of the plant. The disappearance of a factory like that of Blanquefort would have effects well beyond the employees of the plant. Families, but also the many related jobs in the area would also have been affected. This was a basic objective for a local mobilization of magnitude. The local support collective that was set up was a real body of mobilization including employees, families and all the left organizations.

Politicians of all types found themselves obliged to take a position. Even one of the main right wing

politicians of the French bourgeoisie, the Mayor of Bordeaux Alain Juppé (UNP), requested the maintenance of industrial activity on the site. The French government were also questioned. In two successive car shows, in October 2008 and 2010, several thousand employees and their families came to Paris to assert their demands.

This mobilisation led to a first spectacular result. On January 1, 2011 Ford Europe repurchased the plant. The senior echelons of Ford Europe came to Bordeaux to assert this return.

But the battle was not won because no serious commitment to activity for maintenance of jobs had been taken. The battle for the rejection of redundancies in the factory took the form of demanding Ford present a “structuring” project. This demand reflects the particularity of this plant as a components factory. In so doing, the unions at the plant have not turned into counter-experts detailing viable and profitable industrial solutions in today’s capitalist world. But they placed the Ford Europe directorate and the French government – at both national and local levels - before their specific responsibilities. It is this approach which has paid off.

Finally, on May 6, 2011 Ford Europe announced forthcoming investment in Blanquefort plant to maintain nearly a thousand jobs at the site. Of course, nothing is definitively acquired and these promises will only become reality at the price of a continued mobilization at the level of that which has been built over several years in the factory and in the region.

As of now, this long term mobilization has paid off and it is no coincidence that one of the main organisers of this struggle in the Ford Blanquefort plant is Philippe Poutou, the activist that the New Anti-capitalist Party (NPA) has chosen as candidate for the French presidential election of 2012.

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P.S.

* This is a report on the situation in the car industry in France given to the European Conference of Workers in the Car Industry, held at the International Institute for Research and Education in Amsterdam on May 28-29, 2011. We have also published on ESSF (article 22168), [Declaration of the European Car Workers’ Conference](#) , and (article 23107) [European Car Industry : Creating cross-border links between militants](#) and (article 23106), [The state of the European car industry](#) from the same event.