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France

The campaign against the closure of Ford in Bordeaux

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The Ford factory in Bordeaux has been the subject of a long struggle between the managers, intent on closing the plant, and the CGT union. Successive actions mean the plant remains open, but there are hard lessons for workers in similar positions.

The Ford factory at Blanquefort (near Bordeaux, France), which employs 3,500 workers, has been threatened with closure since 2000. It manufactures automatic gear boxes for the U.S. market and manual gearboxes for the European market. It is the part of the plant manufacturing automatic gear boxes and employing 2500 workers that has been under threat.

The automatic gear boxes are an ageing product nearing the end of their life, and production has been declining until today. The speeches from the company directors about the future of the plant were sometimes contradictory reassuring, and at other times threatening.

The first struggle was conducted on the works committee (Comité d'Entreprise) to sound the alarm to the workforce. The management was formally requested to provide more information on the future of the plant. This proved to be of little value. In 2005, the company announce a programme for the reduction of posts (Plan de Suppression d'Emplois). Five Hundred employees take-up offers of early retirement and voluntary redundancy.

The official reason given for these job losses was to ensure the survival of the plant. The CGT was the only union that attempted to organise opposition to this round of job losses, but mobilisation and industrial action was weak. We were in a factory which had not seen any action during the previous 20 years, and the idea that these job losses were unavoidable was widespread. The offer of early retirement and voluntary redundancy was made to buy peace and avoid conflict, and management announce that the future of the plant is safe until 2014. But in November of that same year, there is another offer of 165 early retirements. The CGT tried to fight to improve the offer, but the mobilisation of the workforce was still too weak.

From then on, the CGT steps up its campaign against the job losses by warning that management was gradually going to empty the plant of workers until it closed it down completely. In February 2007, we organised a demonstration in defence of jobs in the town of Blanquefort. No other union joined the demonstration, but it was a success because 250 employees from the plant were on it. This was the beginning of our campaign.

From then on, other unions join in the campaign, creating a joint union committee that lasts 12 months. We then have two years of actions and mobilisations which were eventually successful.

In 2007, there are several demonstrations: 500 in March in Bordeaux, then 1000 in the same month. We organise a conference on jobs in April with local councillors and state organisations. The aim was to warn the local community and to put pressure on the state organisations so that they intervene. It took a very long time, but eventually they do respond.

The first outcome of the demonstrations was the creation of a working party convened by the Prefecture, and including Ford management and local elected officials. Ford had announced earlier that year that it would withdraw from the plant in 2011, and this working party was trying to develop a plan by 2007 for the future of the plant. Each time the working party met, we organised strikes and demonstrations.

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Ford gave virtually no information and continuously tried to stop mobilisations. It denounced “agitators”, but was nevertheless wrong-footed because it had never had to deal with such a campaign. The management argued that it was trying to find solutions, but never mentions closure. Gradually, the feeling develops amongst the workforce that there is a grave threat.

Furthermore, the working party offers no perspectives as it claims that despite trying it had no solution for the plant. We step up the pressure, and in October 2007, we organise a strike that is supported by 800 workers. For the first time ever, the union for technical and supervisory staff supports the action. In November, a one-day strike closes the factory and 1400 demonstrate in Blanquefort.

Reports in the local media are widespread, the local population is informed and pressure is growing on local elected officials. From the beginning, we argue for the defence of all the jobs inside Ford, but also of all those indirectly employed which is about 10,000 in the whole region.

The working party meets for the last time in December, and we organise a demonstration in Bordeaux. The mood is angry as the working party has nothing to report and inside the plant the atmosphere is tense. The next two days, there is a spontaneous strike just before the Christmas break. Management seem unable to control the situation.

The return to work in January 2008 is difficult. Management try to take the initiative by announcing the closure of the site for April 2010. The atmosphere becomes again fatalistic, but we try to relaunch the mobilisation with pickets at the end of January. We are relatively few, but the media is there and management realises that there is still a determined group of union activists.

There is a discussion that starts amongst the activists about whether the fight is for jobs or for generous terms for early retirement and voluntary redundancy. This is a debate that continues to the end. Management attempt to get us to abandon the fight for jobs, while the other unions have an ambiguous position as they say that it is utopian to try to save jobs.

The determination of the CGT allows the struggle to be re-launched with a new strike organised by the joint-union committee. Because some unions are hesitant, preparations are clandestine. We start a strike on Saturday 16 February with 30 pickets at 5am. This is the beginning of a 10-day strike during which we block all gates, and organise food, patrols and braziers (it was very cold). During 10 days, the workers are mobilised, although some don't go on strike. The strike is picked up by a national and regional media, with mobile studios outside the gates. This gets the local population informed who come to support us and start to establish support/solidarity committees that are key to building a bridge between the workforce and local people.

During the strike, the reports in the media increase as Olivier Besancenot (LCR) and Segolene Royal (PS) turn up to show their support.

This strike had one important effect: to force the management of Ford Europe to get involved who up till now had kept clear. Twice they come to Bordeaux to get us to stop the action and to calm us by making a ridiculous financial offer. The strike is ended following legal proceedings that threaten us with heavy fines. But in any case we would have been unable to keep the action going for much longer. Management go again on the offensive as they saw the strike as an insult to them.

During the strike, there were two demands: save all jobs and also generous financial offers (although at the CGT we were not in favour of the latter). Management will use the demand for a financial offer to break up the joint-union committee, and to sow confusion and demobilise amongst the workforce. They are partly successful as the

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joint-union committee breaks up.

Management proposes an agreement for financial compensation in case of redundancies in the next three years. We continue fighting against this attempt to make job cuts. Four unions sign up to this deal, but the CGT and the CFTC refuse. As these two unions represent the majority of the workforce, we are in a position to get this agreement cancelled. Management attack the CGT and tries to bribe the workforce by making an offer of a minimum of 50,000 Euros in case of redundancy. We faced hostility from some workers and a declaration of war from the unions that had signed up to the deal.

We go through a difficult period as management with the unions that had signed-up organise a referendum to isolate the unions that were fighting. We called for a boycott, which may have been a mistake, but as more than a third did not vote, the small majority for the deal was meaningless.

From July 2008, we plan with the local support committees for a demonstration in Paris at the Car Show. We finance the transport with bingos, meals, and a concert organised by the Council of Blanquefort. We eventually organise 600 people to go up by train to invade the Car Show, resulting in a big splash in the media and the exasperation of the management with this campaign that never ends.

In the summer of 2008, the possibility of the plant being taken over becomes a serious option as pressure is beginning to pay-off. We have no faith in the statements from management, but those of the government and local public bodies indicate the possibility of a take-over with at least 500 jobs safe.

At the end of October, management announces the closure of the site for ten weeks. This is a shock to the workers and we demand full-pay as compensation during the close-down period. On the eve of the closure there is a meeting of the works council where management refuse to improve compensation. We invade the meeting and block management in the car park. There is a physical confrontation and the atmosphere is very tense. It was only the CGT there with 200-300 militants. Management is shaken but denounce political manipulation by the extremists and refuses to make any improvements. The CGT is now alone as the CFTC break-off, repeating the criticism of management against this demonstration.

During the closure of the last two months of 2008, the CGT organises weekly union meetings, and two demonstrations in Bordeaux. We keep up the pressure and a presence in the media, with the objective of saving all jobs.

Finally, there is an official announcement on the 2 February 2009 that the plant will be taken over by HZ, a German holding company, in co-operation the German industrial group Hay. It is a strange return to work, which gives the impression that Ford is trying to stop the mobilisation, to make itself forgotten and to sub-contract out the closure. Nevertheless the promise is that all jobs will be safe. The local public bodies and elected officials declare that they have worked hard over the last two years but forget to mention the campaign by the workers that forced them to find a solution.

From the 1st May, the plant has officially be bought up by another company, but Ford is still has a presence on the board. Ford finances everything until 2011, and we carry on with the same production while we wait for new products to be brought in over the next three years. We have little confidence in management, and most workers don't believe them, but the campaign has stopped.

It is both a victory and a trick by management. The CGT is alone in continuing to keep up the pressure, and argues that to really defend jobs we need to be vigilant and continue the struggle as soon as there are new attacks.

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