Because of our union's policy to use the system as much as possible, and not to use the workers, the workers feel helpless; they've got no control over their lives.


This is not an expression of anti-unionism, rather it's the opposite. It's a call for an effective union organisation in an industry which has proved to be the most demoralising and alienating yet devised by western capitalism.

Alienation in its sharpest form is a well known feature of assembly line work in the vehicle industry. One effect has been the creation of an extremely volatile workforce of a potentially explosive nature.

The 1973 strike at Ford's Broadmeadows plant did explode. "The picture of the migrant worker, belting the wall of the boss's office with a long-handled shovel, is the picture of the utter frustration felt by the workers."¹

The '73 strike began on May 18 from a lunch-hour mass meeting of workers at Broadmeadows. This was during a national campaign by the four main industry unions for improvements in wages and conditions. The shop stewards also wanted some control over the speed and staffing of the assembly line.

The unions, after a series of meetings and negotiations with the company, recommended the acceptance of an offer from the company at a mass meeting on June 11. The offer did not include the shop stewards' claim and was rejected. The "riot" occurred on June 13 at a demonstration outside the plant. Another meeting, this time of assembly line workers only, decided to continue the strike. Union officials present agreed and admitted the previous return recommendation had been a mistake.
Some union officials said that mistake was caused through a communications gap between the officials and the rank and file. A six-week strike at the same plant in 1981 over a wage claim revealed that, while that gap still exists, mainly through language and cultural differences (the Broadmeadows plant has a workforce, approximately 95 percent of whom are migrants), the gap is more than one of communication.

The '81 strike was called an unofficial strike by the Vehicle Builders Employees Federation (VBEF, formerly known as the VBU) officials. Unlike the '73 strike, federal VBEF union officials actively moved to isolate the strikers, particularly the shop stewards who led the strike.

The Ford company sought to take advantage of this isolation. It threatened to take away a previous wage increase, sack workers, and tried to intimidate workers into breaking picket lines.

The Ford company was, in fact, taking advantage of one of the labor movement’s great historical weaknesses, that of spontaneity. Both strikes had strong elements of spontaneous reactions against a system which unfortunately includes a tendency for unions to become bureaucratic in their working, i.e. “to use the system as much as possible, and not to use the workers”.

"When a blue does occur there is impatience among the workforce not only because of the nature of the work but because not much opportunity is given to the workers to decide for themselves," Felipe Rodriguez told me after the September/October strike at Ford Broadmeadows last year.

When they do occur, divisions between union officials and the members play into the companies’ hands, particularly a company like Ford which has a long anti-worker and anti-union history.

Henry Ford’s attitude to workers was shown in his concept of labor organisation: "The idea is that the man .... must have every second necessary but not a single unnecessary second."2

In applying that concept to his own plants he actively opposed any interference by unions or shop-floor organisation which would disturb the smooth running of the production line.

Unions and Ford

The work was hard and labor turnover high. In 1913 over 50,000 workers quit, between 13,000 and 14,000 workers were required for the plants at any one time.

Ford employed gangsters throughout his plants to prevent union organisation of his workers. After a long struggle, successive Fords were eventually forced into the realisation that the union movement had to be accommodated.

That realisation came in 1941 when Henry Ford was eighty years of age. A spontaneous strike at Ford’s River Rouge plant in the USA produced Ford’s first signed contract with a union, the Union of Automobile Workers:

(Henry Ford) was too old to change fundamental ideas. He was still shrewd enough to approve of the workers’ UAW dues being deducted at source by the Company. He liked the idea of being the ‘union’s banker’, but he couldn’t bring himself to completely accept the idea of trade unions in his factory. Edsel (Ford) and young Henry (Henry Ford II) had realized, however, that they were entering the era of the soft-sell, that years of fear and confrontation were no good for business, and that they were bound to lose in the end. After all the UAW wasn’t so bad. Why not accept it and use it?

The Ford company, however, has not succeeded in using the union movement for its own ends. Although some officials have proved vulnerable to company overtures, the line between company and union interests remains clearly defined. The so-called "soft-sell" has always been backed by a hard-core anti-unionism.

The company has always followed a policy of only negotiating with national union officials, relying on possible vulnerability to get their aims across. Shop-floor organisation which the company, only in recent years, has
been forced to accommodate is one of the union's strongest means of lessening this vulnerability.

**Shop floor organisation**

A strong shop steward organisation, provided it is united with union officials, lessens the chances of unorganised or spontaneous action breaking out, and also gives union officials a strong bargaining base. Unfortunately, some officials see the developing shop steward movement as challenging their own positions within the union movement.

In 1962, Amalgamated Engineering Union leader William (later Lord) Carron wrote an article for the house journal of the Ford Motor Company, the *Ford Bulletin*, entitled "Where is the enemy". He wrote:

The old need for unbridled militancy rapidly diminished with the reduction of our immediate major social and industrial problems. One still finds pockets of militancy which are inspired by motives that cannot be accepted as being based purely upon trade union principles. These motives spring from attempts to change that system of government we have in the United Kingdom and would attempt to replace this system with one that has been rejected in Parliamentary and Local Government elections by an overwhelmingly majority of opinion. Disruptive tactics with political ambition as a source of inspiration will not contribute to the further well-being of our citizenship or, for that matter, our membership, which depends entirely in these modern years upon the produce of our factories and workplaces.4

Union officials' irritation with shop-floor militancy was also shown by Transport and General Workers Union official, Les Kealey, who said, "unfortunately a number of stewards of certain unions at Dagenham (Ford plant in England) have got into the habit of trying to solve their own problems".5

Not dissimilar sentiments toward shop stewards at Broadmeadows were shown by federal and state Vehicle Builders Employees Federation (VBEF) officials during the strike last year.

One state organiser told the shop stewards during the strike:

The supreme body of the Victorian branch of the union is the executive. Decisions made by the executive meetings are subject to review and approval by branch meetings of the union once a month.

At the branch meetings it is possible for members to pass resolutions urging the federal secretary to commence negotiations with a company on a wage claim, or any other issue.

This would be regarded as proceeding in the proper direction, with a claim, to be considered by all state branches and then be served on the company after being endorsed by all states.

What happened in the Ford dispute?

The stewards in the car assembly plant decided on their own that the time was right, for the car assembly plant only, to commence action to win a wage increase.

What did that decision mean?

No consideration was given to what the position would be with other plants across the Broadmeadows site, or Geelong, Homebush and Eagle Farm. So we then had a number of stewards, from the car assembly plant, attempting to run the union right around Australia, completely ignoring the fact that other plants and states did exist, and in a successful campaign they would have to be involved whether they liked it or not.

That certainly sets out the problems for any campaign against a company that has a spread of plants around the country, where a strike in one section of a plant in one state can affect workers in other plants and states. This means that the company can, and does, use
this fact to isolate the strikers and considerably weaken the campaign.

The steps outlined by the organiser for the proper procedures that should have been followed by the Ford Broadmeadows strikers were designed to avoid that problem. But the theory completely ignores certain facts, not least the volatility and spontaneous nature of the workforce in the car industry; the fact that the nature of the work itself builds up pent-up anger and frustration.

That speech, and public attacks against the shop stewards by federal secretary Len Townsend, served only to inflame the situation and drive the wedge further between the shop stewards/workers, and the union officials. Rather than enhancing organisation as opposed to spontaneity by closing the gap between officials and rank and file, union officials' actions made things worse.

Federal secretary Len Townsend called the shop stewards "dogs" in a radio interview and referred to the strike as unofficial. However, soon after the strike began (September 18), he promised them full support and received a standing ovation. A week later he turned against them.

In fact, it was Townsend who first lodged the claim on the company, about 12 months before the strike began. Felipe Rodriguez said that was done without consulting the shop stewards or workers. "The claim just lay there with no effort to move it along," he said.

We took up the claim and gave the company time to negotiate with our union officials, but we never gained any evidence that our federal officials approached the company in a positive way to start negotiations. Because no attempt was made by state officials to call shop stewards meetings to discuss the claim or to inform the workers what was going on, and in the light of so many industries getting wage increases, frustrations were mounting. It got to the stage where the workers were threatening shop stewards that they would be replaced.

The shop stewards called their own mass meeting at which it was decided to strike. The six weeks that followed revealed weaknesses in the shop-floor organisation which were due mainly to the inexperience of many of the shop stewards. Most had only been stewards for 12 months before the strike. But lessons were learned which could lead to a more vital union organisation among production workers in the vehicle industry.

Among those lessons was the realisation that the stewards have to participate in trade union politics, attend branch meetings, learn to use union rules and procedures, and get information out to rank-and-file workers.

**Strike lessons**

Soon after the strike ended on November 2, the Ford shop steward committee launched its first publication, in seven languages, calling for renewal and full participation in the union and for workshop democracy in the industry.

The publication raised three important questions:

1. The relationship that exists in the factories, e.g. the discrepancy of power between workers and bosses, the need for democracy etc. (e.g. industrial democracy)
2. The relationship between union leadership and rank and file (e.g. questions re: union democracy, representative leadership, efficiency of union structures, etc.
3. The unfair nature of industrial laws and how they are used to the detriment of workers.

The last mentioned refers to the use of the secret ballot ordered by the Arbitration Commission which purportedly ended the strike. The shop stewards said of the secret ballot:

The so-called secret ballot was shown for what it is: a farce and a real "travesty of democracy". Firstly, it is easy to claim a victory when more than half of the Ford workers were starved after 4 weeks on strike and without any financial help from the union.

Secondly, the resources of Ford and the federal VBEF were put together to
Changing the Union

The fact that the shop stewards were able to pull themselves together and begin organising in a more effective way after a bitter and potentially divisive experience, strikes a hopeful note for the future. But it must also be remembered that same hope was expressed after the 1973 strike. Many of the problems that existed in that period still exist. The historically high labor turnover in the industry makes it difficult to sustain an ongoing organisation.

That high turnover rate is not only explained by the harsh, demoralising nature of assembly line work and the low wage-rate (most Broadmeadows workers did not average more than $180 take-home pay before the strike), but is also explained by the high migrant character of the workforce.

Many people when they first arrive in the country find it easier to get work at the car making plants than in other industries. Most see the job as temporary; as a means of getting themselves on their feet until they find better employment. However, it is becoming more difficult to find other jobs in a declining job market, so many are staying on—if they can.

New technology, however, is forcing them out. Ford Broadmeadows has recently introduced ten robots which will take over the function of 800 people. This and other restructuring moves in the industry make it even more imperative for a strong, revitalised union organisation in the industry to protect the workers and advance their demands.

Restructuring, particularly the development of the “world car”, is creating new problems for union organisations. The “world car” development extends the problem discussed earlier—i.e. the company playing off strikers in one plant against workers in another plant or state, to workers in other countries.

Ford workers in other countries are organising to meet this problem:

In October 1979, with the support of their unions, Danish workers called an international meeting where Ford workers from Denmark, Holland, Britain, West Germany and France set up an informal commission. Workers from Belgium, Spain and Portugal have since joined the commission.

Whether Ford workers become part of the European organisation, or a similar one in the Asian/Pacific region, may depend on the union’s response to the developing shop steward movement at Broadmeadows and other Ford plants.

Senior shop steward, Frank Argondizzo, says the internal affairs of the union will and can only be altered or changed by the members directly:

The present leadership, if it wants to regain the trust of the workers has to do some really serious reflection and start to involve the whole membership in its affairs. A failure to respond to this appeal will be a sad state of affairs both to themselves personally, and as a consequence the renewal process may be retarded a little longer.

Time is on the workers' side; the workers have learned to be patient.

REFERENCES

5. Ibid, p.53.