

**More Life, Less Speed: Industrial Unrest at the Ford Motor Company in  
Britain and the Politics of Working-Class Autonomy in the Long 1970s**

**Eoin O’Cearnaigh**

**Goldsmiths, University of London**

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### **Declaration of Authorship**

I Eoin O’Cearnaigh hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:



27 October 2019

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## **Abstract**

Aside from contemporaneous material by activists, scant traces of the politics of working-class autonomy appear in the historiography and wider literature on Ford in Britain. Focusing on the 1970s, this study reframes the firm's history in relation to these politics. Doing so highlights the role of workers' struggle at Ford, which was a key locus for more widespread unrest at a time of crisis and transition. As a work of twentieth-century social and cultural history, it draws on a broad range of sources, including newly conducted oral history interviews and material from private papers not cited previously.

In the USA, France and Italy, an international context linked the automobile sector to the emergence of autonomist politics, which were articulated in Britain from 1960 onwards by Solidarity, a group with links to Ford's workforce. Later that decade unrest at Ford became enmeshed with the ill-fated policies of a Labour government, leading up to the launch of the rank-and-file newspaper *Big Flame*. Influenced by Italian workerism, Big Flame became a national political organisation that intervened at Ford, where another strike confronted the subsequent Conservative administration's Industrial Relations Bill. When Labour returned to power, the further breakdown of trade-union mediation at Ford led to increased conflict and saw these politics develop further inside and outside the factory. Elements from this tendency then initiated the Ford Workers Group ("The Combine"), which took a lead in the 1978 Ford pay strike, a major blow against the government's Social Contract. Although activity continued under Margaret Thatcher's premiership, including efforts to coordinate Ford's European workforce, unrest at the firm never again had the same impact. This account reframes our understanding of this history, while also having relevance to current theoretical debates, for instance those concerning accelerationism, and recent renewed interest in the practice of workers' inquiry.

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## List of Abbreviations

AEF	Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
BNP	British National Party
BSA	Black Socialist Alliance
CAITS	Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems
CAST	Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre
CC.OO.	Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions)
CFB	Communist Federation of Britain
CGT	Confédération générale du travail (General Confederation of Labour)
CGTP	Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (General Confederation of Portuguese Workers)
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CIS	Counter Information Services
CNT	Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour)
CP	Communist Party
CPGB	Communist Party Great Britain
CPSA	Civil and Public Services Association
CSE	Conference of Socialist Economists
CU	Claimants Union
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Security
DIAS	Diensten Internationale Arbeiders Samenwerking (International Workers Cooperation Services)

EFWC	European Ford Workers Combine
ELBF	East London Big Flame
EMF	European Metalworkers' Federation
FNJNC	Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee
FUJCC	Ford Unions Joint Co-ordinating Committee
FLAC	Ford Langley Action Committee
FWC	Ford Workers Combine a.k.a. Ford Workers Group ("The Combine")
FWG	Ford Workers Group
GLC	Greater London Council
GMWU	General and Municipal Workers Union
HSG	Haringey Solidarity group
ICFTU	International Confederation of Free Trade Unions
IG Metall	Industriegewerkschaft Metall (Industrial Union of Metalworkers)
IMF	(1) International Monetary Fund (2) International Metalworkers' Federation
IMG	International Marxist Group
IRD	Information and Research Department (Foreign and Commonwealth Office)
IWC	Institute For Workers Control
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
ISTC	Iron and Steel Trades Confederation
JWC	Joint Works Committee
LCC	London County Council
LRD	Labour Research Department
MC	Movimiento Comunista (Communist Movement)
MCC	Merseyside County Council
MIJLC	Motor Industry Joint Labour Council

NJACCWER	National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights
NJNC	See FNJNC
NUGMW	National Union of General and Municipal Workers
NUWM	National Unemployed Workers' Movement
NUVB	National Union of Vehicle Builders
OPEC	Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OIC	Organización de Izquierda Comunista (Organisation of the Communist Left)
PCE	Partido Comunista de España (Communist Party of Spain)
PTA	Paint, Trim and Assembly Plant
SWP	Socialist Workers Party
TGWU	Transport and General Workers Union
TNI	Trans National Institute
TUC	Trades Union Congress
UAW	United Automobile Workers
UGT	(1) Unión General de Trabajadores (General Union of Workers) (2) União Geral de Trabalhadores (General Union of Workers)
WFTU	World Federation of Trade Unions

## Introduction: Debunking the Myth of Henry Ford

“You all remember,” said the Controller, in his strong deep voice, “you all remember I suppose that beautiful and inspired saying of Our Ford’s: History is bunk. History,” he repeated slowly, “is bunk.”<sup>1</sup>

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

Aldous Huxley clearly indulged in a rhetorical flourish when he deified ‘Our Ford’ in *Brave New World*. And yet, Henry Ford and the company he established have, in truth, transcended this individual’s life history and the sphere of industrial production to take on an iconic quality. If not quite a god, Ford has certainly become a mythological figure. The terms *Fordism* and *Fordist* represent social, economic, political, and cultural changes at the heart of twentieth-century history.

Over the same period the Ford Motor Company actually became a titan of industry. The firm, the largest in the world for a time, consistently ranked among the top three US corporations for much of the American Century.<sup>2</sup> A workforce based in Britain made a significant contribution to this success, following the opening of Ford’s first overseas factory on a Manchester industrial estate in 1911.<sup>3</sup> After the Second World War British output overtook that of an older Canadian subsidiary, coming second only to the US parent company.<sup>4</sup> This position was only ceded to Ford Werke AG, a German subsidiary, in the early 1970s. Output peaked in

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<sup>1</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1932), p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Fortune 500 Companies — A Database of 50 Years of Fortune’s List of

<sup>2</sup> ‘Fortune 500 Companies — A Database of 50 Years of Fortune’s List of America’s Largest Corporations’ <[http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500\\_archive/full/1955/](http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500_archive/full/1955/)> [accessed 20 April 2016].

<sup>3</sup> ‘Northern Motor Works’, *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, 18 October 1911, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Mira Wilkins and Frank Ernest Hill, *American Business Abroad: Ford on Six Continents* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1964), pp. 436–37.

1972, before going into steady decline thereafter.<sup>5</sup> The production of Ford cars in Britain finally ceased in 2002.<sup>6</sup>

The subsidiary's economic and political significance for Britain followed a broadly parallel trajectory. Having taken an early lead in the automobile sector, the firm struggled through the 1920s before making a partial and gradual recovery in the 1930s. Despite such weak performance, an employer's organisation the Economic League eulogised 'Henry Fordism' as 'a new gospel for industry' in the aftermath of the 1926 general strike.<sup>7</sup> Ford's re-organisation of work around the automated assembly line appeared to offer industrialists a solution to the political unrest that dominated labour relations between the wars.

Wartime production revived Ford's fortunes, a position consolidated afterwards. With the automobile central to government strategy for managing the economy and in particular the balance of payments, this US subsidiary manufactured a third of all British cars exported in 1949. This played a key part in Britain becoming the world's leading car exporter the following year, albeit briefly.<sup>8</sup> Ford would not regain its former position as the largest domestic automobile producer, due to mergers between domestic rivals. Throughout the long boom the

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<sup>5</sup> Steven Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix to Chapter 13 & 14', in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, ed. by Hubert Bonnin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 118-47 (p. 119); Paul Thomes, 'Searching for Identity: Ford Motor Company in the German Market (1903-2003)', in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, ed. by Hubert Bonnin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 150-95 (p. 173).

<sup>6</sup> Steven Tolliday, 'The Decline of Ford in Britain: Marketing and Production in Retreat, 1980-2003', in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 73-117 (pp. 105-9). Ford continues to produce components including engines in Britain, and produced commercial vehicles, Jaguar cars, and Land Rovers there for a period after 2002.

<sup>7</sup> *Henry Fordism: A New Gospel for Industry* (London: The Economic League (Central Council), 1927).

<sup>8</sup> Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, p. 139; D. G. Rhys, *The Motor Industry: An Economic Survey* (London: Butterworths, 1972), pp. 375 & 382; Statistical Office of the United Nations, 'Table 119 Motor Cars Production', *United Nations Statistical Yearbook*, 2, 1949, 270.

firm generally outstripped these rivals though in terms of exports, profitability and investment.<sup>9</sup>

More broadly a relationship of interdependence developed between the post-war welfare state and a system of mass production epitomised by Ford. Keynesian macroeconomics and social democratic welfare policies created the social stability and effective demand that underpinned this golden age of economic growth. Mass production generated the employment, consumer goods, tax receipts and exports required to sustain the system.

Then amid the political upheaval of the late 1960s, world economic growth began to falter. As a result, the incomes and industrial policies of successive British governments became increasingly enmeshed with the company's strategy for managing labour relations and negotiating pay contracts. As the crisis came to a head, a series of disputes at the company took on national political significance. Towards the end of the next decade a nine-week national Ford strike in 1978 marked a break between company and government strategies, foreshadowing changes in government policy brought in after Margaret Thatcher's general election victory six months later.

My dissertation takes the company as a case study to focus on the conflict, crisis, and restructuring of this final period. This covers what we could think of as the long 1970s: from around the time of the corporation's transnational integration as Ford of Europe in 1967 until 1988, the year that an unofficial pay strike—the last of its kind—ended in failure. As well as contextualising the long 1970s in relation to the previous history of Ford in Britain, the structure of my dissertation extends this period somewhat further to situate developments in relation to the electoral cycle.

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<sup>9</sup> Rhys, p. 361.

The thesis of my dissertation is that a politics of working-class autonomy emerged in Britain at this time, which has been largely overlooked in the relevant historiography. My use of this term refers to a loosely defined tendency that emerged from Marxist politics, more broadly, in the latter half of the twentieth century. While this perspective was most clearly articulated in Italy both politically and theoretically, related currents also emerged in the USA, France, and Britain. The relationship between these politics and industrial unrest at Ford came to my attention through my father-in-law Alan Hayling who was secretary of the Ford Workers Combine and a member of Big Flame, a group influenced by the Italian movement. In this study of Ford, I aim to assess how these perspectives can reframe our understanding of this pivotal period of social unrest and structural change. In the process I also aim to provide an evaluation of the contemporary relevance of these politics today, both in terms of theory and practice.

## **Methodology**

This dissertation is a work of twentieth-century social and cultural history, broadly conceived, exploring the relationship between technological development and social, cultural and political change. It draws on a wide range of sources that include public records, newspapers, memoirs, archival material, the private papers of individuals, and theoretical and analytical work by academics and political activists.

Beyond basic standards of good scholarship—accurate citation and referencing of sources, thorough archive searches, attentiveness to chronology, etc.—historical method might be best understood as a set of problems. To review those most relevant to this study, let us begin by considering Walter Benjamin's

adage exhorting the historical materialist to 'brush history against the grain'.<sup>10</sup> By this, Benjamin suggested the need for a particularly critical reading of those sources that represent a socially dominant perspective to avoid misplaced empathy for history's victors. Sharing Benjamin's cultural attentiveness and scepticism towards grand narrative, E. P. Thompson adopted such an approach in *The Making of the English Working Class*.<sup>11</sup> This text 'opened up the ambiguities and complexities of cultural history' according to Geoff Eley, a historian working at the intersection of social and cultural history today.<sup>12</sup>

Thompson's depiction of working-class subjectivity then came under critical scrutiny as the discipline's cultural turn progressed.<sup>13</sup> This saw the assumption that social reality was itself constructed through language established as paradigmatic. Gender history, a key constituent of the new cultural history associated with this shift, also drew attention to gendered aspects of Thompson's viewpoint.<sup>14</sup> While such studies have led some to dismiss the continued relevance of class analysis, Geoff Eley and Keith Nield have suggested a relationship between the changing disciplinary conventions of historians and wider structural changes in society. They have also argued that 'the political formation of subjectivities and the structured consequences of capitalist inequality can both be addressed in the same analysis', suggesting that insights gained from cultural history might inform a new history of society.<sup>15</sup> This dissertation sets out to steer a course along such a route.

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), p. 259.

<sup>11</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963).

<sup>12</sup> Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class: Studies of English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, Carolyn Steedman, *Labours Lost: Domestic Service and the Making of Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> Geoff Eley and Keith Nield, *The Future of Class in History: What's Left of the Social?* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), p. 17; See also Eley.

My research also draws upon oral sources: both newly conducted interviews and existing recordings. The use of such material by historians is intimately linked to the historiography of Ford, with the company's official historian Allan Nevins widely seen as 'the father of modern oral history'.<sup>16</sup> By 1938 Nevins had already explored the use of interviews by historians and the implications of the emergence of sound recording technology for the discipline.<sup>17</sup> He then began to apply these insights to his own research from the late 1940s onwards. Nevins early work foreshadowed subsequent developments by reflecting on the wide, potential applications of oral sources to fields such as Native American history. His later studies, however, focused more narrowly on the testimony of elite leaders, senior Ford executives among them.

Conducting interviews has also been a well-established practice for labour historians, which preceded and contributed the expansion of oral history from the late 1960s onwards.<sup>18</sup> More recently the prominent oral historian Paul Thompson identified the collection of 'basic information about [...] technology and work organisation' as a legitimate and valuable application for such sources.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he mentioned this specifically with reference to studies of the relationship between social forces, culture and technological change. Such issues are of central concerns to this dissertation.

Yet, any current work that sets out to integrate interviews into a broader study cannot overlook how oral history has shifted the ontological focus historians bring to such sources. The subjective qualities of interviewees' testimony and the construction of historic memory, both of which began as problematic issues faced

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<sup>16</sup> See for instance 'Meeting on High: The First National Colloquium', *Oral History Association Newsletter*, 1.1 (1967), 1–2 (p. 2).

<sup>17</sup> Allan Nevins, *The Gateway to History* (New York, NY: 1938, Appleton Century), p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> John Saville, 'Oral History and the Labour Historian', *Oral History*, 1.3 (1972), 60–62.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 84.

when applying oral sources to questions of historical fact, have become the primary objects of inquiry for many historians today. For some, this raises questions about their legitimate application to ‘the concrete situation of the history of technology’.<sup>20</sup> I take the view that, while making full use of such sources requires attentiveness to subjective factors, it remains both possible and necessary to glean other information from them too. Such an approach is consistent with the epistemological and ontological assumptions associated with a critical realist perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from such general considerations, the interview process itself raises further methodological issues. The focus of this research made it appropriate to select interviewees based on their ability to address specific questions. This is a well-established practice for oral historians, initially informed by the grounded theory approach to qualitative research. For my purposes, this has involved starting with a small number of existing contacts and seeking to ‘snowball’ out to others with whom they worked and/or organised politically at Ford.<sup>22</sup>

To prepare for the interviews, I drafted a list of non-leading, open questions tailored to each individual (based on my prior understanding of their relationship to the subject matter). These served as interview guides rather than questionnaires. So long as proceedings didn’t deviate too far off topic and the relevant points were covered, I aimed to practice active listening rather than imposing too rigid a structure on the interviews.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Chris Niblett, ‘Oral Testimony and the Social History of Technology’, *Oral History: Journal of the Oral History Society*, 8.2 (1980), 53–57 (pp. 54–55).

<sup>21</sup> Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975).

<sup>22</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*, p. 151; Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1968), pp. 62–65.

<sup>23</sup> Along with my own previous experience, both as an oral history interviewer and interviewee, the following sources helped inform my approach: Thompson, pp. 222–45; ‘Getting Started | Oral History Society’ <<http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/getting-started/>> [accessed 29 July 2016]; Pierre

Many views on historical method that have entered mainstream academic thought share a genealogical relationship with the topic of this dissertation. Italian workerism (*operaismo*) and autonomist Marxism represented open, anti-determinist political tendencies, which developed a distinct approach to questions of structure and agency.<sup>24</sup> In the late 1960s Marxist humanism came under criticism for focusing too heavily on questions of alienation derived from Marx's early work.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the weaknesses of this structuralist argument, it contained a grain of truth, reflecting ideas prevalent in the new left at the time. A workerist approach instead offered a reinterpretation of the critique of political economy in Marx's later work, which placed strategic emphasis on how workers' subjectivity could be read back into this analysis.<sup>26</sup>

## Literature Review

The automobile industry in general and the Ford Motor Company in particular played a prominent part in twentieth-century history. A vast body of potentially relevant material confronts anyone embarking upon research into a particular aspect of this history. To tackle this challenge, I have found it useful to group material into two main categories: general texts and those written from below. From the latter set, I have then separated out a sub-category of sources that relate conflict in the automobile sector to the politics of working-class autonomy. Doing so draws attention to material that, in my view, has been inadequately addressed by the wider literature.

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Bourdieu, 'Comprendre', in *La misère du monde*, ed. by Pierre Bourdieu, Libre Examen (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1993), pp. 903–39.

<sup>24</sup> Mario Tronti, 'Lenin in Inghilterra', *Classe Operaia*, 1, 1964, 1 & 18–20; Mario Tronti, 'Lenin in England', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement*, ed. by Red Notes, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London: Red Notes/CSE Books), pp. 1–6.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Althusser and others, *Lire 'Le Capital'* (Paris: Maspero, 1967).

<sup>26</sup> Harry Cleaver, *Reading 'Capital' Politically* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1979).

Any such categorisation leaves itself open to question. Some texts straddle the boundary between categories, while others do not fit neatly into any such schema. The present case is no exception. Such an exercise still retains a heuristic value as it helps clarify my thesis, which explores how material from the final sub-category might reframe our understanding of Ford's British history.

The literature on Ford can be traced back to works written for Henry Ford by Samuel Crowther in the 1920s.<sup>27</sup> While these provided a vivid account of the company's early history, John Kenneth Galbraith counselled caution regarding their reliability. 'Ford was the product of a pioneer public relations ploy', he warned, 'the first of the industrial fairy tales'.<sup>28</sup> Such sources serve most readily to remind us of Ford's self-construction as a mythological figure.

A more rigorous official company history only emerged in the 1950s, following the death of Henry Ford. This began with a three-volume study funded by the Ford foundation to mark the firm's fiftieth anniversary.<sup>29</sup> Another work funded by the company followed shortly afterwards, focusing specifically on Ford's international reach.<sup>30</sup> More recently a two-volume official history of the corporation's European operations came out for Ford's centenary. This brought together work from across a range of disciplines, representing a breadth of critical scholarship to provide a richly multifaceted account of the company from a range

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<sup>27</sup> Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *My Life and Work* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1922); Henry Ford and Samuel Crowther, *Today and Tomorrow* (London: William Heinemann, 1926).

<sup>28</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, 'Was Ford a Fraud?', in *The Liberal Hour* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), pp. 141–65 (p. 142). Galbraith's perspective illustrates the limits of my categorisation: as a Keynesian economist about to be appointed as a US diplomat, he hardly viewed Ford *from below*, but nor does his sharply independent scrutiny of the firm fit readily into a *general* category centred around management's perspective.

<sup>29</sup> Allan Nevins, *Ford: The Times, the Man the Company* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954); Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge 1915-1933* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957); Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963).

<sup>30</sup> Wilkins and Hill.

of different perspectives.<sup>31</sup> Yet, apart from one brief chapter, suggesting the importance of ‘the transnational dimension’ of industrial unrest through a comparative study of Britain and Germany, this aspect of the firm’s history generally received only marginal attention.<sup>32</sup>

The start of this turn towards greater independence in Ford’s official historiography coincided with the publication of memoirs by a number of the firm’s former managers. These included Harry Bennett’s account of his time as head of the company’s infamous ‘service department’, a private police force with a well-deserved reputation for violence. Bennett claimed that the department’s activity represented ‘an *organization policy*, and was carried out *by the organization*’,<sup>33</sup> emphasising Henry Ford’s share of responsibility for its actions. The hardboiled style of this ghostwritten memoir, which reads like a detective novel, was reflected in its publication under an imprint specialising in ufology. A few years later Charles E. Sorensen, a former Ford executive, offered a more sober personal account, which highlighted the contribution he and other senior Ford executives had made to the company.<sup>34</sup> Taken together both books began to undermine a well-crafted image of Henry Ford as a socially benign and technically creative genius.

Such works can be situated within a broader interdisciplinary context that extends beyond personal memoir and business history into management studies,

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<sup>31</sup> *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, ed. by Hubert Bonnin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGÉ, 2003).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Fetzter, ‘Walking out of the National Workplace: Industrial Disputes and Trade Union Politics at Ford in Britain and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s’, in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, ed. by Hubert Bonnin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGÉ, 2003), I, 393–416 (p. 393).

<sup>33</sup> Harry Bennett and Paul Marcus, *We Never Called Him Henry*, Gold Medal Books (New York, NY: Fawcett Publishing, 1951), p. 34 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>34</sup> Charles E. Sorensen and David L. Lewis, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York, NY: Norton, 1956; repr. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006).

human relations, and industrial relations.<sup>35</sup> Urwick Orr and Partners' activities as management consultants in a late-1960s job evaluation programme at the company's British subsidiary suggest the relevance of Lyndall Urwick's contribution to management theory.<sup>36</sup> Other particularly relevant work from the field of industrial relations includes an account of unrest in the British automobile industry and another study co-written by an ex-shop steward and a former labour relations manager, who both participated in negotiations during the 1968 sewing machinists' strike at Ford Dagenham.<sup>37</sup>

Steven Tolliday's role as joint editor of the company's most recent official history draws attention to his previous research, including collaborative work with Jonathan Zeitlin. Originally working in the field of economic and social history,<sup>38</sup> Tolliday and Zeitlan began to frame the dynamics of the late twentieth century in terms of a transition between Fordism and flexible specialisations.<sup>39</sup> While recognising the importance of a variety of structural and institutional factors, this approach generally focused on strategic choices made by management. Over the trajectory of Tolliday's writing, an account emerged of developments at Ford and across the automobile industry in general that emphasised causal complexity, while ascribing little importance if any to the action of workers.

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<sup>35</sup> Seminal texts in these three related disciplines include Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1913); Elton Mayo, *The Social Problems of an Industrial Civilisation* (Boston, MA: Harvard University, 1945); John T. Dunlop, *Industrial Relations Systems* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1958). A Ford Foundation Grant supported Dunlop's work with the Inter-University Study of Labour Problems in Economic Development.

<sup>36</sup> Lyndall Urwick and Edward Franz Leopold Brech, *The Making of Scientific Management*, 3 vols (London: Management Publications Trust, 1945).

<sup>37</sup> H. A. Turner, Garfield Clack, and Geoffrey Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry: A Study of Industrial Unrest and an International Comparison* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1967); Henry Friedman and Sanders Meredeed, *The Dynamics of Industrial Conflict: Lessons from Ford* (London: Croom Helm, 1980).

<sup>38</sup> *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>39</sup> *Between Fordism and Flexibility: The Automobile Industry and Its Workers*, ed. by Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (Oxford: Berg, 1992).

A historiography of Ford from below can be traced back to Upton Sinclair's semi-fictional didactic novel *The Flivver King*. This was written in support of the United Automobile Worker's (UAW) campaign to unionise the company's workforce. From its opening passage, Sinclair almost suggested that Ford invented the car: "‘Mom,’ said little Abner, ‘there's a feller down the street says he's goin' to make a wagon that'll run without a hoss.’"<sup>40</sup> A tension runs throughout the text between similar sections enthralled to the carmaker's achievements and others depicting management's brutal enforcement of labour discipline. In an earlier novel *The Jungle*, Sinclair described processes in the Chicago meatpacking industry that paved the way for the introduction of the automated assembly line to the automobile sector. While this brought to public attention an automated system of workflow years before Ford's single greatest innovation, Sinclair's own role in disseminating this technology appears ironically to have been lost on the author.<sup>41</sup>

While Henry Ford had already attracted adverse attention, notably for his publication of anti-Semitic propaganda on an industrial scale,<sup>42</sup> his commercial activity would only undergo thorough critical examination after the Second World War. Keith Sward, who initiated this process, shared Sinclair's links to the UAW, having worked for the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) the union federation to which the UAW was affiliated. Years before a credible official version of the company's history saw publication, Sward began to subject the Ford myth to scrutiny.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Flivver King: A Story of Ford-America*. (Pasadena, CA: the author, 1937).

<sup>41</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York, NY: Jungle Publishing Co, 1906).

<sup>42</sup> See for instance Edwin Pipp, *The Real Henry Ford* (Detroit, MI: Pipp's Weekly, 1922).

<sup>43</sup> Keith T. Sward, *The Legend of Henry Ford* (Toronto: Rinehart & Co, 1948).

The Communist Party also figured prominently in the activities of the UAW-CIO until a purge at the beginning of the Cold War.<sup>44</sup> The party played a comparable role organising Ford's workforce in Britain at least until the early 1960s. This gives particular relevance to material issued by the party as well as by shop stewards, many of whom were party members.<sup>45</sup>

Then an upsurge in industrial militancy at Ford at the end of the 1960s stimulated wider interest in the firm's workforce.<sup>46</sup> Huw Beynon explicitly adopted a perspective 'from below' for his sociological account of shop stewards at Ford's Halewood plant on Merseyside. Beynon focused on the subject position of the shop steward as a militant representative of their workmates.<sup>47</sup>

When a second edition came out in 1984, Beynon eschewed the opportunity to bring the story up to date, simply including two new chapters, providing a brief overview of strategic developments from the perspective of management and labour. The new version ended, however, with 'A Bibliographical Note', listing 'a number of important publications' produced in the meantime.<sup>48</sup> This included material by Red Notes, Big Flame, and the Ford Workers Group. This dissertation takes up this thread, while examining how such sources might offer an alternative perspective from Beynon's initial thesis on the relationship between rank-and-file trade unionism and shop-floor workers.

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<sup>44</sup> There is even a credible case that UAW leader Walter Reuthers, who led this purge was a member for much of the 1930s. Victor G. Devinatz, 'Reassessing the Historical UAW: Walter Reuther's Affiliation with the Communist Party and Some of Its Meaning—A Document of Party Involvement, 1939', *Labour/Le Travail*, 49 (2002), 223–45.

<sup>45</sup> See for instance The Communist Party Midlands District, *Men and Motors Today... A Policy for the Industry* (Birmingham: The Communist Party Midlands District Committee, 1954); Joint Ford Shop Stewards Committee, *What's Wrong at Fords* (London: Joint Ford Shop Stewards Committee, 1962); Kevin Halpin, *Memoirs of a Militant: Sharply and to the Point* (Glasgow: Praxis Press, 2012).

<sup>46</sup> For an early such example see John Mathews, *Ford Strike: The Workers' Story* (London: Panther, 1972).

<sup>47</sup> Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford*, 1st edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973); Beynon, *Working for Ford*.

<sup>48</sup> Huw Beynon, *Working for Ford*, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 397.

Ralph Darlington took a broadly similar approach in his own study into the dilemmas stewards subsequently faced at the same plant.<sup>49</sup> Sheila Cohen's recent history of a union branch at Ford Dagenham was also written in a similar vein. Cohen's conclusion highlighted the shifting balance of forces within the unions: 'The pivot of union-as-institution overpowering, for now, union-as-movement'. In doing so, she framed the power relationship between unofficial rank-and-file union activists and full-time officials as a key dynamic.<sup>50</sup> This suggests a high degree of continuity in terms of the theory and practice of labour unrest going back to the shop stewards movement of the First World War.

Such work can all be situated within a wider body of historical and sociological material by authors sympathetic to the labour movement in Britain since Sydney and Beatrice Webb.<sup>51</sup> Carter Goodrich's study of the conflict between craftsmen and management for control of Britain's engineering workshops in the 1920s is of particular relevance. Specifically, subsequent writers have adopted Goodrich's term *the frontier of control* to describe the shifting balance of forces at work.<sup>52</sup>

Studies 'from below' tend to adopt a Marxist perspective, of one form or another, providing another context within which they need to be situated, beginning with Marx's own writing on work.<sup>53</sup> The outcome of the October Revolution quickly confronted the Bolsheviks with the need to respond practically

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<sup>49</sup> Ralph Darlington, *The Dynamics of Workplace Unionism: Shop Stewards Organization in Three Merseyside Plants* (London: Mansell, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> Sheila Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch* (London: Merlin Press, 2013), p. 194.

<sup>51</sup> Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longmans, Green, 1894); Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (London: the authors, 1898).

<sup>52</sup> Carter Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control. A Study in British Workshop Politics* (London: G Bell & Sons, 1920), pp. 56–62; Darlington, pp. 19–25.

<sup>53</sup> The following are of particular relevance: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Review, 1973); Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach, 3 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Review, 1973).

to questions of how to organise production, giving particular relevance to Lenin and Trotsky's writing on industrial management.<sup>54</sup> This coincided with a struggle for control of the workplace in developed Western countries. Alexandra Kollontai's critique of the Bolshevik leadership's industrial policies was also framed in terms of workers' control, highlighting parallels between the situations faced by workers under both systems.<sup>55</sup> An edition of Kollontai's text republished by Solidarity, a group we will come back to, was accompanied by detailed footnotes. Despite their polemic tone, these forensically dissected how the Bolshevik leadership became enthralled with Fordism after the October Revolution, suppressing Soviet industrial democracy within a political dictatorship.<sup>56</sup> Tangentially to this, the imprisoned Italian Communist leader Antonio Gramsci reflected broadly on the implications of new production methods developed by American industry in general and Ford in particular.<sup>57</sup>

'Workers' autonomy' provides a unifying theme for a final sub-category of texts written 'from below', which can be traced back to dissident Trotskyists in the USA and France after the Second World War. Disillusioned with the orthodox Trotskyist misassessment of the stability of the capitalist system and equally dissatisfied with its account of Soviet Russia, a group of left-wing intellectuals and militant workers began to examine the automobile sector collectively. Phil Singer, a

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<sup>54</sup> This includes material such as Lenin, V. I., 'The Taylor System—Man's Enslavement by the Machine', in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), xx, 152–54; Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1961).

<sup>55</sup> Alexandra Kollontay, 'The Workers' Opposition', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 3 September 1921, p. 5; Alexandra Kollontai, *The Workers Opposition*, Solidarity Pamphlet, 7 (Reading: E. Morse, 1962).

<sup>56</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, *The Workers Opposition*, 3rd Solidarity (London: Solidarity, 1979), pp. 25–34.

<sup>57</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 'Americanismo e fordismo', in *Quaderni del carcere: Edizione critica dell'Istituto Gramsci*, 4 vols (Torino: Einaudi, 1975), III, 2137–81; Antonio Gramsci, 'Americanism and Fordism', in *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 277–318.

Black car worker, made an early contribution with the Marxist theorist Grace Lee Boggs in *The American Worker*.<sup>58</sup>

Singer and Lee Boggs were both members of the Johnson-Forest Tendency, initially a faction of the Socialist Workers Party. This group took its name from the pseudonyms of its two leading members: the Trinidadian historian and political theorist C. L. R. James and Trotsky's former secretary Raya Dunayevskaya. Together they developed an analysis of the Soviet Union as state capitalist, not only in terms of its integration into the world market but also based on the social relations in production within this society. In doing so, they also emphasised how the situation there mirrored increased state intervention to manage industry in the West, highlighting parallels between workers' experiences across both sides of the Iron Curtain.<sup>59</sup> Following a break with Trotskyism, the Correspondence Publishing Committee and Facing Reality, both of which emerged from the Johnson-Forest Tendency, issued further studies of the automobile sector written by members of its workforce.<sup>60</sup>

Within two years of its publication, a French translation of *The American Worker* was serialised in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.<sup>61</sup> This was the eponymous journal of a group that developed a libertarian socialist perspective, emphasising the increasingly bureaucratic form of contemporary capitalism and its apparent stability since the Second World War. Cornelius Castoriadis, *Socialisme ou Barbarie*'s most prominent theorist, emphasised the growing importance of the relationship between '*dirigeants*' (managers) and '*exécutants*' (managed) in

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Romano and Ria Stone, *The American Worker* (Detroit, MI: Bewick Editions, 1972).

<sup>59</sup> J. R. Johnson, F. Forest, and Ria Stone, *The Invading Socialist Society* ([New York, NY]: Johnson-Forest Tendency, 1947), p. 1.

<sup>60</sup> James Boggs, 'The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Workers Notebook', *Monthly Review*, 15.3-4 (1963), 13-93; Charles Denby, *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker's Journal* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1978). An earlier version of Denby's work was originally published under the pen name Charles Ward in 1952.

<sup>61</sup> This begins with Paul Romano, 'L'ouvrier américain (I) (traduit de l'américain)', *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, 1, 1949, 78-89.

modern society, leading to a break with Marxist class analysis and theory of capitalist crisis.<sup>62</sup> Based on a historical critique of the politics of workers' control, Socialisme ou Barbarie also formulated the demand for *autogestion* (self-management), a slogan that was raised more widely during the French factory occupations of 1968.

In 1960 a minority faction of the Socialist Labour League, then the largest Trotskyist organisation in Britain, split away to form the group Solidarity, adopting a perspective close to that of Socialisme ou Barbarie. One of the leading figures among these dissidents was Ken Weller, a shop steward at Ford Dagenham. The firm also provided the subject of analysis for frequent articles in the journal *Solidarity*.<sup>63</sup>

By this point C. L. R. James lived in London with his then wife Selma James. Among other things Selma James edited the newsletter of the Black Regional Action Movement, *Black RAM*, which published articles on the situation encountered by Black workers at the Ford Langley truck assembly plant west of London.<sup>64</sup> Selma James went on to co-author a seminal pamphlet on women and housework with the Italian feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa.<sup>65</sup> This opened a critical dialogue with Italian workerism (*operaismo*): a related political tendency articulated by figures such as Mario Tronti and Romano Alquati from the early 1960s.<sup>66</sup> While Tronti's theoretical

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<sup>62</sup> Cornelius Castoriadis, *Capitalisme moderne et révolution: le mouvement révolutionnaire sous le capitalisme moderne* (Paris: Union Générale D'Éditions, 1979), II, p. 52.

<sup>63</sup> See for instance 'Fords', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 2.7 (1962), 3–4; Ken Weller and Ernie Stanton, *What Happened at Ford*, Solidarity Pamphlet, 26 (Bromley, Kent: Solidarity, 1967). The back cover of the later work features a list of articles on to the automobile industry from the journal.

<sup>64</sup> 'D.R.U.M.', *The Black Ram*, 1.4 (1969), 9–12.

<sup>65</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of Community*, 3rd edn (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

<sup>66</sup> Mario Tronti, *Operai e capitale* (Torino: Einaudi, 1966); Romano Alquati, *Sulla FIAT, e altri scritti*, Materiali Marxisti (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1975). Both of these anthologies include material first published in the early 1960s.

work has led to him being dubbed ‘the “father of European Workerism”’,<sup>67</sup> Alquati developed and applied a politically engaged research method to the Italian carmaker Fiat, derived in part from Marx’s *enquête ouvrière* (workers’ inquiry) a term derived from a survey Marx designed for a French socialist journal.<sup>68</sup>

Another particularly relevant Italian source for our purposes is *Operai e stato*.<sup>69</sup> The first part of this edited volume emerged from a discussion in 1967, attended by figures who would gain prominence through Italy’s Hot Autumn (*l’autunno caldo*) of industrial unrest two years later. These essays attempted to synthesise a historic overview of recent developments in political economy, situating these in relation to the social upheaval of the first half of the twentieth century. At the time of publication, in 1973, two further essays were included, one of which provided an account of Ford in Britain by Ferruccio Gambino.

This choice of subject matter was no coincidence according to the introduction to an abridged English translation that came out the same year: ‘A section of the Italian left has [...] for several years looked to the UK as having one of the strongest working classes in production [...] being one of the weakest links in the capitalist chain, together with Italy.’<sup>70</sup> This text appeared in *Big Flame Fact Folder* No. 3, a dossier of material focused on current workplace struggles in Britain.<sup>71</sup> Ed Emery, the translator, also organised at Ford Dagenham with East London Big Flame and subsequently supported the Ford Workers Group and the Ford Workers Combine.

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<sup>67</sup> Mario Tronti, ‘Tronti on Negri’, in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement*, ed. by Red Notes, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London: Red Notes/CSE Books, 1979), pp. 21–22 (p. 21).

<sup>68</sup> For a recent history of workers inquiry, see Asad Haider and Salar Mohandesi, ‘Workers’ Inquiry: A Genealogy’, *Viewpoint Magazine*, 3, 2013, 1–29.

<sup>69</sup> Sergio Bologna and others, *Operai e stato: Lotte operaie e riforma dello stato capitalistico tra rivoluzione d’Ottobre e New Deal*, Materiali Marxist, 2nd edn (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1973).

<sup>70</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, ‘Workers’ Struggle and the Development of Ford in Britain’, in *Fact Folder*, Issue No. 3 (London: Big Flame, 1973), p. [i].

<sup>71</sup> Gambino, ‘Workers’ Struggle and the Development of Ford in Britain’.

Big Flame went on to publish other material on Ford and the Italian movement.<sup>72</sup> Three years later Emery translated the full text of Gambino's essay, assembled with other related material under the Red Notes imprint, which was also published by him.<sup>73</sup> Red Notes also released a documentary account of shop-floor conflict at Ford in Britain during the mid-1970s, which came out just before a nine-week national strike at the firm: a pivotal moment in this history.<sup>74</sup> Emery translated further material from the Italian movement, including extracts from many of the sources mentioned above.<sup>75</sup>

Between the publication dates of these texts, Harry Braverman's study of the labour process came out provoking widespread discussion.<sup>76</sup> In preparation for a series of workshops and a conference on this topic, the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) issued a pamphlet including material by Raniero Panzieri, Sergio Bologna, and Mario Tronti, alongside Gambino's essay.<sup>77</sup> This initiated what has become known as the labour process debate, which focused on the relationship between working-class subjectivity and the development of work as a qualitative process under capitalist social relations.

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<sup>72</sup> See for instance Big Flame Ford Group, *Five Months of Struggle at Ford* (Liverpool: Big Flame, 1973); Big Flame, 'Shop Stewards at Ford', *Radical America*, 8.5 (1974), 119–39.

<sup>73</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, *Workers' Struggles and the Development of Ford in Britain* (London: Red Notes, 1976).

<sup>74</sup> *The Little Red Blue Book: Fighting the Layoffs at Fords.*, ed. by Red Notes (London: Red Notes, 1978).

<sup>75</sup> See for instance *Italy, 1977-8: Living with an Earthquake*, ed. by Red Notes (London: Red Notes, 1978); Antonio Negri, 'Reformism and Restructuration', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement*, ed. by Red Notes, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London: Red Notes/CSE Books, 1979), pp. 33–38.

<sup>76</sup> Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1974).

<sup>77</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, 'Workers' Struggles and the Development of Ford in Britain (Operai E Stato 1972)', trans. by 'Big Flame', *Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, 6.13 (March 76), pp. Ford.1 – Ford.18; *The Labour Process & Class Strategies*, CSE Pamphlet, 1 (London: Stage 1, 1976).

At the time this opened out into a wider debate about structural changes then taking place.<sup>78</sup> From the mid-1970s a circle of French Marxian political economists the Regulation School (*l'école de la régulation*), began to theorise a transition from a Fordist to a post/neo-Fordist 'regime of accumulation', based on an analysis of the state and civil society as a 'mode of regulation' for capitalist development.<sup>79</sup> Post-Fordism soon became subject to a wide-ranging debate, both in relation to the labour process and at the broader level of political economy.<sup>80</sup>

This brings us full circle to the most recent accounts of Ford 'from above'. In the mid-1980s Piore and Sabel provided an assessment of this technological and organisational change, framed in terms of 'Fordism' and 'flexible specialisation' as competing management strategies.<sup>81</sup> Zietlin developed this approach further in collaboration with Sabel, supported by historical research on Ford conducted with Tolliday.<sup>82</sup> The main distinction between these competing accounts of the rise and fall of Fordism can be framed in terms of structure and agency.

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<sup>78</sup> *Post-Fordism and Social Form: A Marxist Debate on the Post-Fordist State*, ed. by Werner Bonefeld and John Holloway, Capital and Class (London: Macmillan, 1991); Ferruccio Gambino, 'A Critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School', trans. by Ed Emery, *Common Sense: Journal of the Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists*, 19 (1996), 42–64.

<sup>79</sup> A seminal text in this field is Michel Aglietta, *Régulation et crises du capitalisme: L'expérience des États-Unis*, Perspectives de l'économie, 2nd edn (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1976).

<sup>80</sup> For an overview see *Patterns of Work in the Post-Fordist Era: Fordism and Post-Fordism*, ed. by Huw Beynon and Theo Nichols, 2 vols (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2006); *The Fordism of Ford and Modern Management: Fordism and Post-Fordism*, ed. by Huw Beynon and Theo Nichols, 2 vols (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2006); *Regulation Theory and the Crisis of Capitalism: Regulationist Perspectives on Fordism and Post-Fordism*, ed. by Bob Jessop, 5 vols (Cheltenham: Elgar, 2001), III.

<sup>81</sup> Michael J. Piore and Charles F. Sabel, *The Second Industrial Divide: Possibilities for Prosperity* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>82</sup> *World of Possibilities: Flexibility and Mass Production in Western Industrialization*, ed. by Charles F. Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin, Studies in Modern Capitalism/*Etudes Sur Le Capitalisme Moderne* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Tolliday and Zeitlin, *Between Fordism and Flexibility: The Automobile Industry and Its Workers*.

'Capitalist power', Mario Tronti claimed, 'seeks to use the workers' antagonistic will-to-struggle as a motor of its own development'.<sup>83</sup> Working-class agency is key for those who developed his analysis of class composition. While the breadth of material to emerge from the regulation school makes any generalisation challenging, this approach emerged from a Marxist intellectual tradition to focus on the institutional role of the state and civil society in reproducing social relations.<sup>84</sup> Doing so has drawn criticism from Gambino that such work 'tends to overlook human subjects' to instead emphasise structural factors and the institutional role of the state.<sup>85</sup> The final approach involved the adoption of Weberian ideal types of Fordism, or mass production, and flexible specialisation to account for alternative management strategies.<sup>86</sup> The agency of workers, institutional structures, and management strategy take centre stage, respectively. This broadly corresponds with my initial categorisation: material either favouring a perspective 'from below' or 'above', with the former category further split based on whether emphasis is placed on structure or agency.

A further distinction can be drawn between these approaches based on the different interpretations they provide of Fordism. From a workerist perspective its emergence has been linked to political struggles led by craft workers earlier in the twentieth century. The reorganisation of production around the continuous flow of the assembly line was seen, in the first instance, as a response to the threat this movement posed and a means of its defeat. This, in turn, brought the deskilled

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<sup>83</sup> Mario Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis: Italian Marxist Texts of the Theory and Practice of a Class Movement*, ed. by Red Notes, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London: Red Notes/CSE Books), pp. 7–32 (p. 8); The original reads: 'Il potere del capitale cerca di usare la volontà antagonista degli operai come motore del suo proprio sviluppo.' Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, p. 235.

<sup>84</sup> Jessop, III, pp. ix–xi.

<sup>85</sup> Gambino, 'A Critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School', p. 44. Original text in italics.

<sup>86</sup> Paul Hirst and Jonathan Zeitlan, 'Flexible Specialization versus Post-Fordism: Theory, Evidence and Policy Implications', *Economy and Society*, 20.1, 5–9 (p. 2).

'mass worker' to the fore both economically and as a political subject.<sup>87</sup> In what became a foundational text for the regulation school, Michel Aglietta drew on such analysis to then identify Fordism with the mechanisms by which industrial conflict became institutionalised after the Second World War.<sup>88</sup> Gambino suggested the need to differentiate between "regulationist Fordism" and [...] "pre-trade union Fordism" to acknowledge a temporal gap between an earlier period of innovations in work organisation and the subsequent institutional mediation to stabilise this system.<sup>89</sup> The ideal type of Fordism, which is counterposed to flexible specialisation, focuses more narrowly on mass production as a management strategy characterised by rigidity, compared to both earlier craft production and the more flexible Japanese management strategies that came to global prominence in the 1980s.<sup>90</sup>

These alternative accounts of Fordism also gave different views of structural changes in the latter decades of the twentieth century. Highlighting the role of workers' struggle in the crisis of the 1960s, Tronti emphasised the political content of industrial action as a 'strategy of refusal'. More generally, his use of the term 'social factory' suggested a connection between growing social conflict outside of industry in wider society and the increased need for political intervention by the state, in order to maintain the flow of capital.<sup>91</sup> Since the 1970s (post-) workerist/autonomist thought has debated how work has changed through this process of restructuring. Some, such as Antonio Negri, have suggested that reproductive labour and the cognitive work associated with information technology and the creative economy constitute a new immaterial form of labour,

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<sup>87</sup> See for instance the Red Notes appendices to Gambino, *Workers' Struggle*, pp. 1(b) & 2(a-b).

<sup>88</sup> Aglietta, p. 96.

<sup>89</sup> Gambino, 'A Critique of the Fordism of the Regulation School', p. 42.

<sup>90</sup> Tolliday and Zeitlin, *Between Fordism and Flexibility: The Automobile Industry and Its Workers*, pp. 3–5.

<sup>91</sup> Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, pp. 39–59 & 234–52; Tronti, 'Lenin in England'; Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal'.

which has now become hegemonic. George Caffentzis, among others, has denied such claims by suggesting these forms of work can be conceived in materialist terms.<sup>92</sup>

Generally speaking the regulation approach has shared with Italian workerism Marx's assumption that capitalism has an immanent tendency towards crisis. The main difference, as already suggested, is one of emphasis, with greater focus on the structural role of institutions in reproducing social relations.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, proponents of flexible specialisation reject Marxist class analysis, instead placing much greater emphasis on complexity and contingency.<sup>94</sup>

When we turn attention to the historical context leading up to the main period covered by this study, it will be useful to keep in mind the different factors these approaches emphasise: workers' struggle and class composition for autonomist Marxists; institutional structures and the state from a regulationist perspective; and competing management strategies for proponents of 'flexible specialisation'. Assessing the relevance of these categories to an account of this period of the firm's history should help us evaluate how these approaches might best inform our understanding of the rise and fall of Fordism, both in Britain and more generally.

In general, British industrial politics of the 1970s has formed the subject of a growing body of recent work, extending out from sociology and labour history into a wider scholarly and popular literature on social and cultural history.<sup>95</sup> Of

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<sup>92</sup> For contrasting perspectives on this debate see Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 291–93; George Caffentzis, 'Crystals and Analytic Engines: Historical and Conceptual Preliminaries to a New Theory of Machines', *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization*, 7.1 (2007), 24–45.

<sup>93</sup> Jessop, III, pp. ix–xii.

<sup>94</sup> Hirst and Zeitlan, pp. 8–32.

<sup>95</sup> Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went out: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber, 2009); Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were, Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010); Dominic Sandbrook, *Seasons in the Sun: The*

particular relevance to this dissertation, Mike Savage's work has developed the thesis that a non-traditional working-class culture of 'rugged individualism' emerged among male manual workers in the 1970s. In doing so, Savage drew on Beynon's account of shop stewards at Ford Halewood. As automation and deskilling increasingly marginalised the skilled craftsman as an individual subject with a high degree of 'autonomy', the militancy of shop stewards remained an outlet for such subjective self-expression.<sup>96</sup> His use of this term aimed to challenge what he perceived to be a false binary between individual and collective class identities. In doing so, he called into question more pessimistic assessments of working-class self-awareness in this period. He also aimed to suggest a more nuanced take on the context of the rise of Thatcherism than a straightforward narrative of right-wing individualism coming into conflict with and then defeating left-wing collectivism.

Savage's conceptualisation of rugged individualism has influenced more recent work by Jack Saunders, who adopted the term to emphasise the agency of non-traditional worker-activists in the post-war automobile sector. Saunders rightly emphasised the inadequacy of viewing this period of labour history exclusively in terms of external structural factors or practices established earlier by different groups of workers in other sectors. His work also drew on a range of sources, including reports in the 'small iconoclastic libertarian socialist journal' *Solidarity*, although the politics of this periodical's publisher received less attention. While representing his subjects as 'engaging in a process of their own creation', a clear allusion to E. P. Thompson's approach to history from below, Saunders focused on the shops stewards' organisations in which the Communist Party often

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*Battle for Britain, 1974-1979* (London: Allen Lane, 2012); Alwyn W. Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> Mike Savage, "Sociology, Class and Male Manual Work Cultures", in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism 1964-1979*, ed. by John McIlroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell, *Studies in Labour History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), II, 23-42 (pp. 32-33 & 37).

exercised hegemony.<sup>97</sup> While clearly playing a key role in labour relations across much of the car industry, these senior lay trade-union representatives, including those close to the CPGB, had a complicated and at times antagonistic relationship with militant shop-floor workers. Indeed, *Solidarity* provided a detailed, historically informed and theoretically sophisticated account of this situation—the significance of which was not lost on Thompson at the time either.<sup>98</sup>

Saunders most recent work, a monograph on the cultural politics of work in the car industry, came out after the submission of this dissertation for examination. It explored how ‘car-factory activists reinvented workplace trade unionism multiple times’ between the end of the Second World War and the early 1980s. Of particular relevance to this study, Saunders identified Big Flame as one of the far-left groups that ‘drew in the values of the shop floor, which they then fed back to fellow workers in slightly [*sic*] more politicised ways’. In doing so, he struggled to strike a balance between recognising the marginality of such groups and appreciating the wider relevance of their perspective—a dilemma that confronts anyone examining this subject matter. He also recognised the role of the Ford Workers Group in organising the 1978 national Ford Pay Strike, but failed to recognise the role of Big Flame and other autonomist Marxists in initiating this group.<sup>99</sup> Hinging on the dispute, my dissertation sets out to explore how further engagement with these politics might contribute to our understanding of this history.

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<sup>97</sup> Jack Saunders, ‘The Untraditional Worker: Class Re-Formation in Britain 1945-65’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 26.2, 225–48.

<sup>98</sup> For instance, see Ken Weller and Ernie Stanton, *What Happened at Ford*, *Solidarity Pamphlet*, 26 (Bromley, Kent: Solidarity, 1967), p. 15; E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 133.

<sup>99</sup> Jack Saunders, *Assembling Cultures: Workplace Activism, Labour Militancy and Cultural Change in Britain’s Car Factories, 1945-82* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), pp. 191–92 & 258.

Savage's conceptualisation of rugged individualism has also informed a broader reassessment of the social and cultural history of post-war Britain. This has included a proposal to reframe how 'individuals navigated the terrain of class, gender and racial identities' as manifestations of 'popular individualism', a term coined by Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite.<sup>100</sup> Doing so aimed to address key dynamics of this period in terms of the shifting saliency of the subjective aspect of class in relation to other categories of social identity. My own work focuses on how actors struggled at the time to maintain an adequate class analysis capable of accounting for phenomena addressed by these concepts, such as the demand for autonomy by women and Black people as well as workers.

Given the prominent place of the 1978 Ford strike in the Winter of Discontents and this dispute's pivotal role in my dissertation, Colin Hay's work on the mythology surrounding these events has particular relevance too.<sup>101</sup> Hay persuasively demonstrated how a highly partial representation of this history played a constitutive role for Thatcherite politics. However convincing his central thesis, Hay's analysis of the structural issues that confronted British Keynesianism only traced these back to the 1973 oil crisis. This implied an exogenous shock occurred to an otherwise healthy system. While recognising the political and economic dynamics of this crisis as intrinsically intermeshed, an autonomous Marxist reading of the situation by the Midnight Notes Collective suggested that such structural issues went deeper.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Emily Robinson and others, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *20th Century British History*, 28.2 (2017), 268–304 (pp. 268 & 302).

<sup>101</sup> Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30.2 (1996), 253–77; Colin Hay, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63.3 (2010), 446–70.

<sup>102</sup> Midnight Notes Collective, "'Chapter 1. Oil, Guns and Money'", in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War 1973-1992* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992).

Also of relevance both in itself and in terms of its influence on recent work, sociologist John Goldthorpe's contemporaneous analysis examined the dynamics of a situation he saw as driven by market inequalities.<sup>103</sup> Goldthorpe's credible assessment of the reformist character of working-class politics also posed serious issues from a Marxist perspective. For him, these went beyond a political challenge to justify a complete rejection of Marxist analysis of the immanent dynamics of capitalist society.<sup>104</sup> Despite Goldthorpe's nuanced reading of the situation and empathy towards the working class, clearly informed by his colliery-town background, this left no alternative to incomes policy and continuity with a Social Contract discredited by Labour's turn to monetarism.

As a final point, this work examines issues at the intersection of far-left politics and labour history. A recent multi-volume work edited by Evan Smith and Matthew Worley aimed to start 'a conversation among scholars and activists about the history of the British far left'. In doing so, Smith and Worley set out to redress the balance of a historiography excessively focused on the CPGB and SWP.<sup>105</sup> My dissertation takes up this invitation.

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<sup>103</sup> John H. Goldthorpe, 'The Current Inflation: Towards a Sociological Account', in *The Political Economy of Inflation*, ed. by Fred Hirsch and John H. Goldthorpe (London: Martin Robertson, 1978), pp. 186–214.

<sup>104</sup> John H. Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, and Frank Bechhofer, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge Studies in Sociology, 3, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), III, p. 2.

<sup>105</sup> *Against the Grain: The British Far Left from 1956*, ed. by Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Evan Smith and Matthew Worley, 'Introduction: The Continuing Importance of the History of the British Far Left', in *Waiting for the Revolution: The British Far Left from 1956*, ed. by Evan Smith and Matthew Worley (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 1–10 (pp. 3–4).

## 1. Workers' Struggle and the Development of Ford, 1911 to 1964

The country is in a state of chaos. The transport systems have completely broken down as a result of the Railway Strike. Lawlessness and riot are reported from almost every big centre of population, and so far there is no prospect of a settlement.<sup>106</sup>

*Reynolds's Newspaper*, 20 August 1911

*HMS Antrim* patrolled the Mersey Estuary in August 1911 during the Liverpool General Transport Strike. In one of four related Royal Navy deployments along the British coast that summer, the destroyer had its guns trained on the docks in an assertion of the state's authority over striking workers on Merseyside. This marked a high point in a wave of social upheaval leading up to the First World War known as the Great Unrest. As industrial action erupted into a general strike, street fighting broke out when troops violently dispersed a peaceful mass demonstration in the city on 13 August. While this incident added another 'Bloody Sunday' to the annals of British labour history, the disturbances only culminated two days later. In further clashes with residents of a predominantly Irish neighbourhood, soldiers escorting a vanload of prisoners to Walton Gaol hospitalised fifteen civilian: five of them with gunshot injuries; two of which proved fatal.<sup>107</sup>

As unrest spread across the country, the authorities initially showed reluctance to even station troops nearby in Manchester, concerned to avoid any unnecessary provocation to the city's striking workers. Following 'great trouble among the goods porters and carters', however, soldiers were eventually deployed

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<sup>106</sup> 'Serious Conflict Yesterday Between Troops and Strikers', *Reynold's Newspaper*, 20 August 1911, p. 1.

<sup>107</sup> Sam Davies and Ron Noon, 'The Rank-and-File in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike', *Labour History Review*, 79.1 (2014), 55–81 (pp. 57–67) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/lhr.2014.4>>. For an overview of Syndicalism in Britain and the Great Unrest, see other articles in the same issue, as well as Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism 1900-1914: Myths and Realities* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

to two Manchester train stations and a goods yard in neighbouring Salford.<sup>108</sup> The city had played a more prominent role in the build up to these events the previous autumn, when Manchester hosted the First Conference on Industrial Syndicalism. This event was called by Tom Mann, a key labour organiser since the New Unionism of the 1880s and the most prominent British advocate of a more militant industrial politics. Delegates at the conference passed a motion declaring that ‘the time is now ripe for the industrial organisation of all workers on the basis of class—not trade or craft’<sup>109</sup>—and Mann went on to play a leading role in the strike in Liverpool.

For a time, the campaign for parliamentary representation gave way to industrial direct action. This wave of syndicalism provided the immediate context in which Ford operations began in Britain. Such disturbances also marked a transition towards a more militant industrial politics internationally, coinciding with the heyday of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in America for instance. A number of those I interviewed cited syndicalism as a precursor for the industrial action in which they participated half a century later, one of them referring to the involvement of his family at the time.<sup>110</sup>

Yet, the historiography of Ford in Britain makes no mention of the Great Unrest. This might seem all the more remarkable since the Fordist assembly line can be seen as a technological response to precisely this sort of industrial conflict, as discussed further below. This chapter charts the first half-century of the firm’s British history, focusing on class dynamics such as these. Doing so provides context for the account of unrest at Ford and the politics of working-class autonomy during the long 1970s to follow.

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<sup>108</sup> London, National Archives, HO 45/10656/212470 ‘321: Report of Reasons for Sending Troops into Manchester and Blackburn during the Period of Strikes, August 1911’.

<sup>109</sup> ‘A Manchester Message to the Workers of Britain’, *The Industrial Syndicalist*, December 1910, pp. 1–47 (p. 18).

<sup>110</sup> Brian Ashton, Interview, 2015.

## **A New Gospel for Industry, 1911 to 1931**

While Ford already traded in Britain before 1911, two events that year transformed the country from yet another marketplace into a key location for the firm. The Ford Motor Company (England) Limited was registered that March, with a thousand pounds of share capital.<sup>111</sup> Then in October the Ford Manchester Works opened, overseen by an English managing director Percival Perry. The company's first plant outside North America became operational.<sup>112</sup>

A former coach works on the American-inspired Trafford Park industrial estate, gave the firm access to Manchester's established workforce and well-integrated transport infrastructure.<sup>113</sup> Its location lay directly opposite the Salford goods yard, where troops had been mobilised two months earlier, on the opposite bank of the Manchester Ship Canal. Thirty miles downstream this waterway fed into the River Mersey at the epicentre of that summer's disturbances.

While Ford already led the highly competitive US car industry, this move preceded two measures that saw the firm transformed into the largest company in the world. These were a policy of paying relatively high wages and the technological innovation of introducing the automated assembly line. When Henry Ford visited Britain the following year, 'Perry explained [...] his plan of "high wages and straight wages"' to the US industrialist according to an official company history.<sup>114</sup> To be clear, the subsidiary's pay policy helped inspire the Five Dollar Day, the corporation's US profit sharing scheme, which aimed to reduce labour turnover. In the absence of the state intervention associated with Fordism after the

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<sup>111</sup> London, National Archives, BT 31/19905/114576 Company No: 114576 Ford Motor Company (England) Ltd., Henry Ford et al., 'Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Ford Motor Company (England) Limited, 8 March 1911.

<sup>112</sup> 'Northern Motor Works'.

<sup>113</sup> Ian McIntosh, *Ford at Trafford Park: "An Americanised Corner of Old Jog-Trot England*, Manchester Sociology Occasional Papers, 30 (Manchester: Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, 1991), pp. 2-12.

<sup>114</sup> Nevins, *Ford: The Times*, p. 540.

Second World War, such corporate largesse proved short lived on both sides of the Atlantic. All the same, labour relations at the Manchester works helped drive a policy of paying adequate wages to sustain economic demand, a recurrent objective of the Fordist model.

The autumn before the introduction of the Five Dollar Day, a strike broke out at the Manchester Works that corroborates this sequence of events. Craftsmen downed tools over the allocation of work between themselves and unskilled workers. To justify this action, the representatives of these skilled workers reportedly asked ‘why the firm are ready to pay 10d. an hour to the labourers if the work they do is not of a skilled character’.<sup>115</sup> While the strikers were ultimately defeated, a picket remained outside the factory when a local profit sharing scheme was announced the following January in the wake of parent company’s announcement of the Five Dollar Day.<sup>116</sup>

This incident might seem like little more than an attempt by members of a relatively privileged section of the workforce, a labour aristocracy if you will, to defend their own interests against other workers. The craftsmen’s objection to the high pay of the labourers they worked alongside certainly supports such a view. Yet, this strike also called attention to the shifting balance of forces in the workplace at the time.

Ford initially operated in Manchester, as in Michigan, within a paradigm most clearly articulated by Frederick Taylor. Taylor’s theory of scientific management outlined the main challenge facing management: ‘the shop was really run by the workmen, and not the bosses’. To address this, he proposed appropriating a ‘mass of traditional knowledge [...] not in possession of the management’ to gain control

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<sup>115</sup> ‘Manchester Motorworks Dispute: A Sympathetic Strike’, *Manchester Guardian*, 13 September 1913, p. 10.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Engineering: A Reactionary Attitude’, *Manchester Guardian*, 27 January 1914, p. 14.

over production.<sup>117</sup> The strike in Manchester demonstrated how Taylorism accentuated divisions between different groups of workers. The resistance of craftsmen to encroachment by management upon their control of production underscored differences between their interests and those of a growing body of semi-skilled workers. As well as influencing the wage rate for a given task, control over the allocation of work determined who was paid to carry it out.

While the First World War led to a general suppression of industrial unrest, another wave of militancy broke out among skilled engineering workers in the munitions sector who faced less likelihood of military conscription. With wartime labour shortages increasingly met by employing semi-skilled workers, many among them women, in a process known as dilution, which became a major point of contention. In 1915 trade union officials entered an agreement with the government that set terms for this practice for the duration of hostilities, bringing official industrial action to a pause.<sup>118</sup> This left a skilled and well-organised workforce effectively unrepresented as industrial practices underwent profound change. At the same time high demand for skilled labour increased the potential leverage in the hands of these craftsmen.

The first shop stewards movement emerged to represent the interests of these skilled workers during the disputes that inevitably ensued. From 1915 onwards this unofficial movement organised a series of illegal strikes.<sup>119</sup> The Clyde Workers' Committee, one of its earliest manifestations, initially opposed dilution. Harry McShane, an engineer from Glasgow, later recalled this as 'a very difficult fight for socialists who had always been opposed to the craft trade unions and

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<sup>117</sup> Frederick W. Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1913), p. 32 & 48-49.

<sup>118</sup> Branko Pribičević, *The Shop Stewards' Movement and Workers' Control 1910-1922* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1959), pp. 32-37.

<sup>119</sup> Pribičević, pp. 83-84.

advocated industrial unions'.<sup>120</sup> Over time the committee instead tried to control the process of dilution, defending the rights of shop stewards to organise their new workmates. Yet, divisions between workers remained, both based on skill and through the sexual division of labour.

While the immediate post-war period saw a surge in working-class militancy, including strikes by the police and mutinies among the armed forces, the issue of dilution remained unresolved. Writing for the Sheffield Workers' Committee, J. T. Murphy summed up the situation: 'The skilled men resent the encroachments of the unskilled, the unskilled often resent what appears to them the domineering tactics of the skilled, and both resent the encroachments of the women workers.'<sup>121</sup> While the struggle to control the engineering workshops remained a point of contention throughout the 1920s, demobilisation and a slump in demand resulted in unemployment for many, particularly militant stewards and women.<sup>122</sup>

Throughout this period of social turmoil, Ford management maintained firm control over production at Trafford Park. Indeed, there are no further reports of any strikes there. To some extent this reflected a wider resistance to organised labour in the automobile sector. The owner of the largest British car firm Lord Nuffield also refused to recognise trade unions before the Second World War. What set Ford apart from its British competitors was how management maintained control through a dual strategy. This involved the profit sharing scheme mentioned already and the automated final assembly line.

The firm first produced a single component by such means in spring 1913. The final assembly of cars on a production line began in Michigan the following

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<sup>120</sup> Harry McShane and Joan Smith, *Harry McShane: No Mean Fighter* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), p. 76.

<sup>121</sup> J. T. Murphy, *The Workers' Committee: An Outline of Its Principles and Structures* (Sheffield: Sheffield Workers' Committee, 1917), p. 6.

<sup>122</sup> Carter Goodrich, *The Frontier of Control: A Study of British Workshop Politics* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1920).

January.<sup>123</sup> Vehicles then began to roll off the line at the Manchester Works later that year.<sup>124</sup> While Taylor's approach aimed to maximise output by identifying and imposing the most efficient working methods then available, the assembly line set the pace of work automatically. Increasingly advanced machine tools, production organised as a process of workflow and the use of conveyor belts represented the existing state of the art. Ford's achievement was to bring all these elements together to automatically set the rate of production for the motorcar, a particularly large and complex commodity.<sup>125</sup> The company's pay policy also broke with Taylorism. Whereas Taylor advocated incentive pay to motivate individual workers, the Ford wage was made available universally. At least this was the case for adult male employees following a probationary period. This transformed the promise of higher pay from a means of incentivising individual workers into a standard rate, in the process turning its withdrawal into a possible sanction.<sup>126</sup> Though Ford's high wages would not last long, payment for measured day work instead of piecework set the company apart from British competitors for decades to come.

These innovations were introduced amid ongoing social conflict. Outside the factory the Russian Revolution made its impact felt internationally. As well as raising alarm among the ruling class worldwide, the Bolshevik seizure of power led many working-class militants to view the syndicalist focus on industry as politically

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<sup>123</sup> This is according to Henry Ford himself. See Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, pp. 81–82. Ex-Ford managers, notably Charles E. Sorensen, have disputed aspects of this account, raising some confusion about the precise chronology. Yet, Sorensen confirmed the significance of events this winter, which marked the beginning of 'a new era in industrial history' for him. Charles E. Sorensen and David L. Lewis, *My Forty Years with Ford* (New York, NY: Norton, 1956; repr. Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2006), p. 131.

<sup>124</sup> A number of Ian McIntosh, "It Was Worse than Alcatraz" Working for Ford at Trafford Park", *Manchester Regional History Review*, 9 (1995), 66–76 (p. 67).

<sup>125</sup> Galbraith, 'Was Ford a Fraud?', pp. 152–53.

<sup>126</sup> Ferruccio Gambino, 'Ford britannica. Formazione di una classe operaia', in *Operai e stato: Lotte operaie e riforma dello stato capitalistico tra rivoluzione d'Ottobre e New Deal*, 2nd edn (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1973), pp. 147–90 (pp. 154–55).

limited. Though not directly involving Ford, an incident known as the Slough Soviet brought together key individuals who would later confront each other in the struggle for trade union recognition at the firm.

In 1919 Bob Lovell invited fellow toolmaker and militant Wal Hannington to join him at a government transport depot in Slough. Under their leadership the Shop Stewards Committee at the facility organised two successful 'stay-in' strikes that year.<sup>127</sup> Eventually, the government sold the site to the Slough Trading Company, a business directed by the recently knighted Sir Percival Perry during a hiatus in his career with Ford.<sup>128</sup>

Hannington and Lovell went on to join the newly founded Communist Party of Greater Britain (CPGB) in 1920. Lovell would subsequently play a prominent part in the campaign to unionise Ford, eventually as a district officer of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (AEU), while Hannington led the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM). The CPGB also mobilised trade union militants between the wars, albeit with limited success, through another front organisation the National Minority Movement. As the name suggests, the party occupied a relatively marginal position in British politics, even within its trade-union stronghold.

Internal divisions beset the CPGB from the outset. Sylvia Pankhurst was expelled within a year of its foundation for refusing to cede control of the newspaper *Worker's Dreadnought*. This followed the paper's publication of material by Alexandra Kollontai, a leader of the recently dissolved Worker's

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<sup>127</sup> Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles 1919-1936 : My Life and Struggles Amongst the Unemployed* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1936), pp. 3–6.

<sup>128</sup> Ford's first British managing director left the firm for a period, while American managers attempted to run it directly. Richard Davenport-Hines, 'Perry, Percival Lee Dewhurst, Barron Perry (1878-1956)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Time to the Year 2000*, ed. by H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), XLIII, 836–37.

Opposition faction of the All Russian Communist Party.<sup>129</sup> According to Kollontai, the party's industrial policy took a 'jump off the rails of scientific Marxian thought' by rejecting collective management of workers through the trade unions in favour of individual management by technicians.<sup>130</sup> For her, this represented a crucial setback in the struggle against capitalist exploitation. Such disagreement over industrial strategy was linked to wider strategic divisions between revolutionaries in Britain about whether or not to engage in electoral politics and attempt to affiliate to the Labour Party.<sup>131</sup>

Kollontai's work would resurface again decades later in the late 1960s, thanks to the libertarian socialist organisation Solidarity. As we shall see in the next chapter, this group also shared close connections to Ford's workforce. Ultimately, Solidarity members came to adopt a perspective that was critical of Marxism in general, informed in part by their forensically detailed if polemical reading of this period of Russian history.

Meanwhile in post-revolutionary Russia, the question of how to manage industry continued to underscore political divisions between those who were required to work and a new elite enthralled by scientific management. Russian publishers translated works attributed to Henry Ford throughout the 1920s. No doubt, faced with immense challenges, but also in a mood of technological euphoria, the country's political, technical, and cultural elites became increasingly enthusiastic about the possibilities that Fordism and Taylorism appeared to offer.<sup>132</sup> Significantly, Bolshevik leaders came to view such technology as socially

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<sup>129</sup> Sylvia Pankhurst, 'Freedom of Discussion', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 17 September 1917, pp. 1 & 5.

<sup>130</sup> Alexandra Kollontay, 'Russian Workers v Soviet Government (Continued from Our Last Issue)', *Workers' Dreadnought*, 6 May 1922, p. 5.

<sup>131</sup> Matthew Worley, *Class against Class: The Communist Party in Britain between the Wars* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), pp. 2–3.

<sup>132</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), pp. 2 & 39–40; Boris M. Shpotov, 'Ford in Russia from 1909 to World War II', in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, ed.

neutral. This suggested the assembly line could serve working-class interests in a socialist society as effectively as it demonstrably functioned under capitalism.

Back in Britain the failure of the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress (TUC) to provide adequate political leadership left opportunities for the CPGB to take the initiative from the margins. The TUC General Council clearly showed such a lack of leadership in calling off the 1926 General Strike without securing any concessions from employers or the state.<sup>133</sup> In the aftermath of this fiasco and amid rising unemployment, TUC General Secretary Ben Turner then formally adopted a conciliatory approach to industrial relations two years later at the Mond Turner talks. While such a stance aimed to bring about 'a revival in the public standing of the TUC', it took place just before the Great Depression saw the living standards of many workers collapse.<sup>134</sup>

Meanwhile, the 1929 Labour minority government failed to provide any alternative to laissez-faire economic orthodoxy, which proved so counterproductive. As this administration collapsed over how far to pursue austerity policies, Ramsay MacDonald agreed to head a national government willing to implement the cuts needed to secure \$200,000,000 of credit from J. P. Morgan. Aside from the effect of this debacle on the Labour Party's political credibility, the strategy resulted in the withdrawal of sterling from the gold standard. While such an outcome was potentially favourable for British exports, in practice, it failed to achieve a recovery amid ongoing domestic austerity and a spiralling international crisis.<sup>135</sup>

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by Hubert Bonin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 505–29 (pp. 509–23).

<sup>133</sup> John Murray, *The General Strike of 1926: A History* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1951), p. 165.

<sup>134</sup> Alastair J. Reid, *United We Stand: A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2004), p. 366.

<sup>135</sup> Mark Blyth, *Austerity: The History of a Dangerous Idea*, paperback (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 190–91.

Between the wars the Irish War of Independence also had a profound impact in Britain and specifically at Ford. The participation of members of the Irish Citizens' Army in the Easter Rising demonstrated how the politics of nation and class had become entangled within the British Empire. This force emerged from the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union during the 1913 Dublin Lockout, initially under the leadership of James Larkin, a former delegate at the syndicalist conference in Manchester. While Irish socialist republicanism proved inspirational to few workers in Britain, this minority included figures such as Bob Lovell who was politicised by the Rising according to his biographers.<sup>136</sup>

From 1922 onwards, Irish independence also had a more direct and material effect on the company. The Manchester Works had by then already grown from an assembly plant into a fully functioning car factory, with one important exception. It lacked a foundry where components such as engine blocks and wheel axles could be cast. The company sourced these from the Fordson tractor plant in Cork, Ireland. The creation of the Irish Free State made these components subject to McKenna Duties, a tariff on cars and other imported luxury goods.<sup>137</sup> The effect this had on cost initially drove the company's plans to construct a new plant in Britain with a foundry of its own.<sup>138</sup> In July 1924 the firm acquired land for this purpose along the eastern periphery of London on the northern bank of the Thames in Dagenham, Essex.<sup>139</sup>

Around the same period the company began to describe its cars as British. This started in an advertisement encouraging readers to make a purchase before the anticipated withdrawal of McKenna Duties. At first emphasising the British

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<sup>136</sup> Edmund Frow and Ruth Frow, *Bob and Sarah Lovell: Crusaders for a Better Society* (Manchester: Working Class Movement Library, 1982), p. 1.

<sup>137</sup> Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge 1915-1933* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), pp. 369-70.

<sup>138</sup> Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Expansion and Challenge*.

<sup>139</sup> 'Ford Thames-Side Factory: Big Dagenham Scheme', *The Times* (London, 11 July 1924), p. 11. This plan went ahead although McKenna duties were briefly lifted around this time.

labour and materials embodied in a Ford vehicle served to demonstrate the marginal effect a change in this policy would have on cost. To reinforce the point, the company offered to refund any price difference for purchases made in the meantime.<sup>140</sup>

The firm's marketing soon took on a more patriotic tone though. The following year a fully operational Ford assembly line represented Manchester in the Mother Country Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition. A Union Jack also flew from a Ford car as it rolled off the Manchester assembly line to celebrate production of a quarter of a million automobiles for the British market.<sup>141</sup> The company marked the occasion with a brochure, which boasted that British employees made up over ninety-nine per cent of its Manchester workforce.<sup>142</sup>

Despite plans to move operations south, production continued there throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s. Afterwards, former workers would describe conditions resembling those at Ford's US facilities: company police maintained rigid discipline; talking was banned; workers were refused toilet breaks; and managers dismissed individuals arbitrarily, unchecked by an intimidated workforce. One ex-employee later compared it to the notorious Alcatraz Prison,<sup>143</sup> while another recalled how the firm's welfare department extended surveillance into employees' lives outside work: 'to see that you had a good home, to check that you were teetotal, to see if you gave your wife or your

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<sup>140</sup> See for instance 'Ford: Policy on McKenna Duties', *Western Morning News*, 30 May 1924, p. 6.

<sup>141</sup> 'Housing and Transport', *The Times* (London, 23 May 1925), section Empire Day and British Empire Exhibition Supplement, p. viii.

<sup>142</sup> *The British Ford: Facts from the Factory* (Manchester: Ford Motor Company (England) Ltd, 1925), p. 33.

<sup>143</sup> Keith Ward, 'Ford of Manchester: A Cut Throat Fight to Get the Jobs', *Manchester Evening News*, 22 June 1978, p. 9.

mother your wages'.<sup>144</sup> Such practices mirrored the policies of the so-called 'sociological department' at the parent company in Michigan.

Under these conditions the Manchester Works remained operational throughout the 1922 Engineering Lockout. Even a power cut four years later during the General Strike failed to disrupt the flow of work. With a *Model T* improvised into a source of electricity the line kept flowing throughout this major industrial dispute.<sup>145</sup> Ford appeared to have overcome the working-class antagonism faced by the rest of industry. Management seemed to have achieved absolute control of the shop floor.

The image of success that Ford projected and the firm's undoubted effectiveness at imposing labour discipline belied the reality of the situation though. Despite the continuous expansion of the British car market during the 1920s, Ford's production peaked at the beginning of the decade. Output reached just over 45,000 vehicles in a fifteen-month period before going into a steady decline.<sup>146</sup> Within four years the company went from controlling two thirds of the British market to losing its leading position to Morris Motors. By the end of the decade, it would fall even further down the ranks of British motor manufacturers.<sup>147</sup>

No doubt, specific local factors contributed to this change in fortune. The US managers who replaced Perry displayed incompetence, and government fiscal policy penalised Ford's choice of a twelve-horsepower engine. Meanwhile, British firms Morris and Austin adopted aspects of mass production, while producing cars

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<sup>144</sup> Keith Ward, 'Ford of Manchester Part Two: Working at Ford's "Drove Some to Suicide"', *Manchester Evening News* (Manchester, 20 June 1978), p. 8.

<sup>145</sup> Keith Ward, 'Ford of Manchester: Tin Lizzie Put the World on Wheels', *Manchester Evening News*, 21 June 1978, p. 8.

<sup>146</sup> An annual figure is not available for 1920 due to a change in the company's financial year. Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, pp. 118–20.

<sup>147</sup> Peter King, *The Motor Men: Pioneers of the British Car Industry* (London: Quiller Press, 1989), pp. 7–8, 70.

more tailored to the local market.<sup>148</sup> Yet, these problems also reflected the commercial fortunes and erratic management style of the US parent company. The 1920s saw Ford replaced as the American market leader too, with US consumers favouring the General Motors range over the out-of-date and uniform *Model T*.<sup>149</sup> While Henry Ford continued to preach its virtues, a particularly inflexible version of Fordism already began to go into decline. At one stage this uncompromising approach to mass production, which famously offered the customer 'any colour that he wants so long as it is black', even attempted to impose left-hand drive vehicles on British motorists.<sup>150</sup>

None of this prevented the Economic League from eulogising 'Henry Fordism' as 'a new gospel for industry' in the aftermath of the General Strike.<sup>151</sup> In the circumstances, such praise had a distinctly political ring to it. Originally named 'National Propaganda', the Economic League had been established by the outgoing Director of British Naval Intelligence towards the end of the First World War. The organisation had the explicit aim of countering communist subversion. Activities included producing and disseminating propaganda, disrupting strikes, and maintaining a blacklist of workers.<sup>152</sup>

The Economic League's main constituency originally consisted of engineering employers in Manchester, where Ford's British operations were based. By this stage the parent company already affiliated to the Employers' Association of

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<sup>148</sup> Steven Tolliday, 'The Rise of Ford in Britain: From Sales Agency to Market Leader, 1904-1980', in *Ford, 1903-2003: The European History*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 7-72 (pp. 13-18).

<sup>149</sup> Sward, pp. 194-99.

<sup>150</sup> Ford and Crowther, *My Life and Work*, p. 72.

<sup>151</sup> *Henry Fordism: A New Gospel for Industry*.

<sup>152</sup> Arthur McIvor, "A Crusade for Capitalism": The Economic League, 1919-39', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 23.4 (1988), 631-55; Labour Research Department, *Facts About the Economic League* (London: Labour Research Department, [n.d.]); Mark Hollingsworth and Richard Norton-Taylor, *Blacklist: The Inside Story of Political Vetting* (London: Hogarth Press, 1988), pp. 147-48.

Detroit, an organisation sharing a similar *modus operandi*. Despite all this, available sources suggest the company had yet to join the Economic League.

### **The Dagenham New Deal, 1931 to 1946**

Machinery and workers began their journey from Manchester to Dagenham aboard ten special trains in September 1931. Beforehand preparations for this move brought changes to both the company structure and its strategy for ensuring an adequate supply of labour.<sup>153</sup> In 1928 the Ford Motor Company Limited was registered with a public share issue and steps began to wind up the old subsidiary. Perry also returned as chairman of what was intended as the firm's European headquarters.<sup>154</sup>

Alongside private investors, the state supported the company's relocation and expansion with unprecedented public investment. Local and national government helped realise Ford's plans by constructing the urban environment required to support the firm's workforce. The urbanisation of Dagenham actually started before Ford's decision to relocate there, beginning in 1921 with London County Council's (LCC) acquisition of land for social housing along the city's eastern edge. However, this programme quickly faltered during a post-war economic slump, when the Conservative government abandoned the commitment of Lloyd George's coalition to build homes fit for heroes.

Subsequently, the local authorities only called a conference to relaunch their housing strategy after the firm announced plans to move there. A report of this meeting in *The Times* described how 'the urgency of the problem had been increased by the decision of the Ford Motor Company to build works that would

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<sup>153</sup> 'Plant for Ford Factory', *Essex Newsman*, 19 September 1931, p. 3.

<sup>154</sup> 'Seven Million Capital: New British Ford Motor Company', *Financial Times* (London, 14 November 1928), p. 7.

employ 10,000 men'.<sup>155</sup> The pace of development, which had dropped off the previous year, then regained momentum. Between 1924 and the end of the decade more than 14,000 homes were built on the Becontree Housing Estate, financed under the first Labour government's Wheatley Housing Act. Within a year of the car plant opening, more than 22,000 council properties in Dagenham housed over 100,000 residents.<sup>156</sup>

As well as constructing housing on what an official history of LCC hailed as 'the largest municipal estate in the world',<sup>157</sup> government expenditure financed road building, utilities, and schools. The Italian Marxist Ferruccio Gambino later described how the 'Dagenham "New Deal"' begins at the moment of the deepest crisis for British capital, which coincides with the first signs of its political recovery'.<sup>158</sup> While too limited in scope to constitute a shift in macroeconomic policy, this public investment programme foreshadowed Roosevelt's policies in the US, which were adopted more widely after the Second World War. Gambino's analysis emphasised the political aspect of both the interwar crisis and such a proto-Keynesian response.

At this precise moment with the international market disintegrating and mass unemployment curtailing the labour shortages that a policy of paying high wages addressed, the company abandoned such a strategy. Within months of Dagenham opening, the firm cut pay by ten per cent. That year also saw NUWM hunger marches, led by Wal Hannington, against the government's means test for outdoor relief. This policy threatened to throw the unemployed deeper into

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<sup>155</sup> 'London Beyond-the-Border: Thames-Side Housing Problem', *The Times* (London, 30 September 1924), p. 7.

<sup>156</sup> Terence Young, *Becontree and Dagenham: A Report Made for the Pilgrim Trust* (London: Becontree Social Survey Committee, 1934), pp. 301–2.

<sup>157</sup> Sir Gwilym Gibbon and Reginald W. Bell, *History of the London County Council 1889-1939* (London: Macmillan, 1939), p. 390.

<sup>158</sup> Gambino, 'Ford britannica', pp. 168–69. Original reads: 'Il New Deal di Dagenham ha inizio nel momento della più profonda crisi economica del capitale britannico, che coincide con i primi segni della sua ripresa politica'.

poverty, increasing competition for scarce jobs and driving wages further downwards in the process. As the NUWM campaign gathered momentum, violence erupted between police and demonstrators, with three days of street fighting in Birkenhead and clashes in Belfast, where police shot two people dead and wounded fifty others.<sup>159</sup>

The following year Ford announced plans to cut wages by a further ten per cent, but this time they met with resistance. Following a meeting of craftsmen in the toolroom, 7000 workers of all grades went on strike. A rank-and-file strike committee then organised mass pickets, bringing gridlock to nearby streets. In response the company barricaded access to the factory, and mounted police attempted to break the pickets, all to no avail.<sup>160</sup>

Throughout this dispute managers refused to deal with union officials. At one point they even attempted to obstruct negotiations by denying that representatives of the strike committee worked for the company.<sup>161</sup> Nonetheless, after four days of disruption an agreement was reached and work resumed. Under the terms of this deal, the pay cut was revoked and strikers were guaranteed against victimisation. While the company still refused to recognise trade unions, skilled and semi-skilled workers managed to secure a pay increase.<sup>162</sup> Rank-and-file action, initiated by craftsmen and taken up by all grades of the workforce, led to this first victory—one in which Communists played no small role. Such involvement reflected how the CPGB's implementation of the Third International's 'class against class' policy

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<sup>159</sup> Wal Hannington, *Ten Lean Years: An Examination of the National Government in the Field of Unemployment* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1940), pp. 50–69.

<sup>160</sup> '8,000 Ford Workers Strike Against Cuts', *Daily Worker*, 28 March 1933, p. 1.

<sup>161</sup> 'Dockers Won't Handle Ford Goods', *Daily Worker*, 29 March 1933, p. 1.

<sup>162</sup> 'Ford Strikers Win Concessions', *Daily Worker*, 30 March 1933, p. 1.

became increasingly accommodating towards trade unionism towards the end of the Third Period.<sup>163</sup>

The following year a dispute occurred at another American subsidiary in the car industry Pressed Steel, which operated a body plant servicing Morris Motors in Oxford. This marked an important shift in the balance of power between different sections of the workforce in the automobile sector. For the first time semi-skilled workers, women among them, went on strike without taking a lead from skilled men to demand increased pay and recognition for their own shop stewards. Indeed, they did so despite their strike being declared unconstitutional by the AEU and NUVB unions, which represented the craftsmen. On the other hand, the TGWU's role in organising the strike consolidated its position in the car industry. Ford workers pledged support for the strike at mass meetings in Dagenham. Such solidarity indicated that union activity continued at the car firm despite the failure to win recognition in the previous year's otherwise successful strike.<sup>164</sup>

By this point Lovell had already moved to Essex, where he worked and became a shop steward at Briggs Bodies. This firm played an equivalent role to Pressed Steel for Ford, operating a body works on the Dagenham industrial estate. Lovell also helped organise union members at the car firm through his AEU activity. He later described how union activists mounted their campaign in 1933 despite high unemployment and a mood of defeat following the General Strike: 'Underground activity was, however, taking place particularly among the skilled engineers in the Toolroom and Machine Shop, led by Ernie Athorne and Jack Longworth both AEU toolmakers'. They published a newspaper, smuggling it into the factory, while their wives distributed leaflets at the gates. Lovell also recalled the opposition they encountered: 'Fascist elements inside and outside the

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<sup>163</sup> Worley, pp. 287–97.

<sup>164</sup> Richard Croucher, *Engineers at War* (London: Merlin Press, 1982), pp. 28–29.

Dagenham factories were showing their ugly heads, and the Economic League was distributing anti-Communist leaflets weekly and holding factory gate meetings'.<sup>165</sup>

By then the League was led by John Baker White, a military intelligence officer in both World Wars and future Conservative MP. Baker White had close personal ties to senior figures in the Metropolitan Police Special Branch and held outspoken fascist sympathies, publishing a glowing report from the 1937 Nuremberg Rally. Henry Ford infamously shared the same allegiances, accepting the Grand Cross of the German Eagle, the highest Nazi honour awarded to foreign nationals, the following year. As mentioned already, the parent company was also affiliated to the Employers' Association of Detroit, an organisation serving the same function as the Economic League in Michigan. In addition, the engineering sector in Manchester, where the subsidiary first opened, provided the Economic League's original industrial base. Firm proof of any direct relationship between Ford and the Economic League at this stage still remains allusive despite such circumstantial evidence.<sup>166</sup>

Conversely, Ford shared well-documented links with Soviet Russia. Indeed, the company had traded there since 1909 with remarkably little interruption despite the chaos and upheaval that engulfed the region. Ford actually advanced from the fringe of the Imperial Russian automobile industry to play a central part in the sectors development by the 1920s. In summer 1929 Perry accompanied the senior US executive Charles E. Sorensen on a trip to the Soviet Union arranged as part of a trade agreement between the US corporation and the Bolshevik

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<sup>165</sup> Bob Lovell, 'What a Bloody Nerve the Ford Management Has!', *Morning Star* (London, 15 November 1968), p. 2.

<sup>166</sup> John Baker White, *Dover-Nüremberg Return* (London: Burrup, Mathieson & Company, 1937); Baker White, John, *True Blue: An Autobiography 1902-1939* (London: Frederick Muller, 1970) In this latter work, Baker White wrote candidly about his previous Fascist sympathies and continued to defend Franco, though he claimed that his earlier articles about Hitler had provided cover for espionage at the Nuremberg Rally. None of this explains the content of *Dover-Nüremberg Return*, which was published on his return to England, a point elided in his memoirs.

government.<sup>167</sup> Under this arrangement, Russian technicians received training in Michigan and technical assistance was provided to build a factory in Nizhny Novgorod. Ford helped establish Europe's largest automobile plant there, a cornerstone for Russian industrialisation.

Paradoxically perhaps, this high point in relations between the company and Soviet Russia coincided with Communist-led campaigns for union recognition in the USA and Britain, which management met with intransigence. In 1932 party members led a hunger march from Detroit to Dearborn, a nearby town dominated by the firm's River Rouge headquarters. This ended violently with five demonstrators shot dead outside Ford's main plant. Harry Bennett, the head of the company's private police force known as the 'Service Department', ruminated sardonically on this incident in his memoirs: 'Russians were actually watching everything out the windows. Rocks flung by the mob were striking there and I cracked, "You're stoning your own fellows up there!"'<sup>168</sup> Clearly, the irony of the situation was not lost on him.

Five years later a campaign by the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union began to gain traction in the USA with sit-down strikes winning recognition at General Motors (GM) and Chrysler. Efforts to organise at Ford, however, only ended in another bloody encounter with the Service Department in the battle of the overpass. The same year also saw Briggs workers in Dagenham appeal to Ernest Bevin, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), for his support following a number of fatal accidents at the firm.<sup>169</sup> This marked the beginning of another attempt to unionise Dagenham. Shortly later Walter Citrine, General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, gave official backing to a recruitment campaign at Ford, Briggs Bodies, and Kelsey Hayes (another of the

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<sup>167</sup> Sorensen and Lewis, pp. 193–204.

<sup>168</sup> Bennett and Marcus, p. 93.

<sup>169</sup> Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 31.

company's suppliers, which produced wheels on the estate). While local officials including Lovell ran the campaign on the ground with shop stewards, it was coordinated for the TUC Organising Department by a recently appointed administrator Victor Feather.

Over ninety thousand leaflets and a broadsheet were printed for a two-week recruitment drive. Demonstrations took place in local parks, factory-gate meetings were held, and a march took place in Romford.<sup>170</sup> This campaign brought together militant shop stewards and Communist local officials with 'moderates' from the national leadership of the trade union movement. While the Communist policy shift from class against class to the popular front had limited success in overcoming hostility from the right of the Labour Party, it helped make such an incongruous coalition possible.

Though union membership continued to grow, the campaign was not so easily won. Such progress would only come after the outbreak of the Second World War. Skilled workers at Briggs were the first to gain union recognition. This followed the dismissal of Mr McDougall, a shop steward in the body plant, for using 'hasty words' with a foreman. To forestall industrial action from disrupting war work, Bevin, by then Minister of Labour and National Service, called a Court of Inquiry chaired by Sir Charles Doughty KC. The *Doughty Report* concluded 'that this Company should adopt the normal procedure for discussing and settling disputes' and recommended that craftsmen should 'elect from their numbers their own representatives'.<sup>171</sup> This outcome made Ford's refusal to recognise trade unions increasingly untenable.

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<sup>170</sup> Frow and Frow, p. 17.

<sup>171</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Industrial Court Act 1919. Report by a Court of Inquiry in the Matter of a Trade Dispute Apprehended at Briggs Motor Bodies Ltd., Dagenham*, Cmd. 6284 (London: HMSO, 1941), pp. 5–6.

The following year Perry—now Barron Perry of Stock Harvard—founded a lobbying organisation Aims of Industry to promote free enterprise.<sup>172</sup> One of its earliest publications recorded a speech of his denouncing the Beveridge Report's proposals for the welfare state.<sup>173</sup> Other pieces published included one in which he dismissed the Bretton Woods architecture for the international monetary system and a favourable review of Friedrich Hayek's polemic against state planning *The Road to Serfdom*.<sup>174</sup> As government contracts in a planned wartime economy created the demand that finally brought operations at Ford Dagenham up to full capacity, the subsidiary's chairman became an outspoken opponent of proposals for the post-war settlement. Ironically enough, at the outset senior management bitterly opposed the development of a system that would become eponymous with Ford and allow the firm an unprecedented opportunity for peacetime growth.

In another Aims of Industry pamphlet, Perry also warned that 'the effects of "equal pay" would be such that grave harm might be done to both male and female workers'.<sup>175</sup> He framed this argument broadly in terms of 'justice', denouncing the 'unfavourable' treatment of men before the criminal, civil, and divorce courts. Yet, the women who joined Ford's workforce during the war undoubtedly contributed to his concerns. References Perry made to a speech by Bevin at a TGWU women's conference, in which he also opposed equal pay, indicated the common ground shared between the industrialist and right-wing union leaders on the issue.

Meanwhile, further pressure began to build for the firm to recognise trade unions. This began with shop stewards calling a series of local meetings in April

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<sup>172</sup> *30 Years of Aims of Industry* (London: Aims of Industry, 1972).

<sup>173</sup> Lord [Percival] Perry, *Industry in Reconstruction: A Speech Contributed to a Series on "Planning for Peace" and Delivered in Slough in February, 1943* (London: Aims of Industry, 1944).

<sup>174</sup> Lord [Percival] Perry, *The Golden Calf* (Aims of Industry, 1944); Hargreaves Parkinson, "'Planning" under Fire', *Aims of Industry: Notes on Industrial, Commercial, Economic and Financial Trends* (London, December 1944), pp. 4–7.

<sup>175</sup> 'Equal Pay': *What It Is and What It Means* ([London]: Aims of Industry, 1944), pp. 2 & 24.

1943.<sup>176</sup> The following month the TUC hosted a conference on Ford, Briggs, and Kelsey Hayes at London's Transport House. A Ministry of Labour report noted that the conference 'pledged its full support to the Shop Stewards and members in their efforts', describing management's attitude at the latter two companies as 'a disgrace'.<sup>177</sup>

Later that year a brief interview with an unofficial shop steward at Ford Mr J. O'Connell appeared in *The Irish in Britain*, a pamphlet published by the Connolly Association, an Irish republican socialist organisation established in London. The piece identified O'Connell as one of twelve stewards to stage a sit-down protest at the Ministry of Labour to enforce an agreement allowing workers from the Irish republic to travel home twice a year. He then explained how this related to the wider situation at Ford: 'We have taken up the problem in Dagenham of the transferred workers, and have a movement in the factories for trade union recognition and we were asked to organise the Irish workers, because if all the Irish were in the union it would be recognised.'<sup>178</sup> The following February *Catholic Worker* revealed another incident in which Ford docked pay from twelve stewards for having spent six hours in a confrontation with management instead of at work. Their demands included recognition for shop stewards, progress in ongoing discussions between Perry and Citrine, reinstatement of a recently dismissed convenor, and a higher rate of overtime pay.<sup>179</sup>

Such reports reflected the emergence of an ethnic division within the British subsidiary's workforce, which dated back at least to the opening of Ford Dagenham. This move coincided with the closure of the Cork foundry and the redeployment of

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<sup>176</sup> 'No Trade Union Recognition at Fords', *Dagenham Post*, 25 March 1943, p. 1; 'Trade Union Recognition in Ford Group', *Dagenham Post*, 29 April 1943, p. 1.

<sup>177</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 10/274, Report of the London RIRO 'I.R. (Lo) 15 b' 24 May 1943; 'Trade Union Recognition', *Dagenham Post*, 20 May 1943, p. 1.

<sup>178</sup> Pat Dooley, *The Irish in Britain* (London: The Connolly Association, 1943), p. 8.

<sup>179</sup> 'Trade Unions and Fords', *Catholic Worker*, February 1944, p. 1.

some the existing workforce to the new facilities in England. It resulted in predominantly Irish migrant labour being allocated work in the new British foundry, a particularly hazardous and unpleasant role as it involved handling molten metal.

Other publications showed some reticence in covering shop-floor disturbances at Ford during the war. Even the *Daily Worker* remained taciturn on the subject. This reflected a combination of Communist Party support for the war effort after the German invasion of the Soviet Union and a cautious approach to Government censorship following the paper's suppression between January 1941 and September 1942.<sup>180</sup> Reports of the London Regional Industrial Relations Officer to the Ministry of Labour provide another source of scarce contemporary records of such incidents. A report for 4 February 1944 recorded that 'Management are continuing to experience difficulty in handling some of the Shop Stewards who are impatient at the delay in receiving full recognition and seize on any pretext for staging a demonstration'.<sup>181</sup>

Within two months Ford entered an agreement with eleven unions. This created the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC) made up of officials and managers. It also established procedures for workers to raise grievances with an 'appropriate full-time official' after the exhaustion of company procedures. A joint press statement stressed that 'the agreement signed today was not negotiated in consequence of any discontent with Ford working conditions'. On the contrary, union officials stated that 'the company has, by its example, played a leading part in advancing the standard of life of workers generally'.<sup>182</sup>

The *Daily Worker* offered a cooler assessment of the company's refusal to recognise shop stewards, calling it 'an undoubted blemish on the agreement'. The

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<sup>180</sup> Croucher, pp. 114–15 & 183.

<sup>181</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 10/443, Weekly Report 4 February 1944.

<sup>182</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 83/957, 'Joint Press Statement'.

paper also made a veiled reference to how ‘pressure from below must have made itself felt on the directors of the company’.<sup>183</sup> The only evidence provided to support this claim though was the fact that union membership continued to grow. A piece in *Catholic Worker* went further to question union negotiators’ motives. ‘Did they deliberately throw the shop steward movement overboard in order to consolidate the trade union bureaucracy?’<sup>184</sup> Another issue of the same paper printed a shop steward’s appeal: ‘let Catholics, Communists, and all workers unite to fight the Ford management to get full recognition’.<sup>185</sup> Almost two decades later the Joint Ford Shop Stewards Committee claimed that ‘in 1944 the shop stewards staged a sitdown in the main plant’.<sup>186</sup>

Though fragmented and perhaps not entirely consistent, such accounts cast Ford in a very different light from the depiction of the company as a model employer by management and union leaders. Given such contrasting views, the assessment of an observer at the Ministry of Labour is telling:

The instrument very carefully excludes Shop Stewards & Works Committees [...] Here is where future trouble will arise. Indeed I am informed that this has already taken place [...] I anticipate considerable trouble arising between S[hop] Stewards & the Unions [...]; & also between Shop Stewards, Works Committees & the Management.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> Sinfield, George, ‘Fords Recognise Trade Unions, but Not Shop Stewards’, *Daily Worker*, 18 April 1944, p. 3.

<sup>184</sup> Jack Trueman, ‘Attack on Shop Stewards Ford—T.U.C. Agreement’, *Catholic Worker*, July 1944, p. 1.

<sup>185</sup> R Blackburn, ‘Shop Steward Position: Ford-T.U. Agreement’, *Catholic Worker*, October 1944, p. 1.

<sup>186</sup> Joint Ford Shop Stewards Committee, pp. 3–4. According to Croucher, pp. 316 & 357, ‘the Lovell Papers, Marx Memorial Library’ also contain relevant sources. However, I have been unable to trace this material despite the patient efforts of Meirian Jump, Archive Manager.

<sup>187</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 10/274, handwritten note dated 26 April 1944.

Lovell later acknowledged that local organisers had helped contain ‘any action that would weaken the fight against fascist Germany’,<sup>188</sup> reigning in trouble until the contract was about to expire in March 1946, well after end of the war. This began with skilled workers walking out of the machine shop.<sup>189</sup> Yet again, craftsmen initiated industrial action at Ford. Their demands included recognition of shop stewards and an increased, standardised rate of pay for skilled work.

Eleven thousand members of the company’s workforce then joined them on strike, widening the demands to include an improved ‘minimum starting rate’ for all employees and ‘equal pay for women’.<sup>190</sup> A committee of about two hundred members, including ninety shop stewards, organised the strike. When management threatened to lock them out of the factory, the strikers occupied the canteen.<sup>191</sup>

This dispute dragged out for over a month before an agreement was reached between union leaders and management at a meeting in the Ministry of Labour. The company agreed to recognise seventy-five ‘shop representatives’, while union officials conceded that ‘the introduction of labour-saving machines’ was necessary to ‘achieve efficient production’.<sup>192</sup> Seven stewards were also appointed to a newly formed Joint Works Committee (JWC), but union officials and managers retained control over pay contract negotiations on the FNJNC. The following day Arthur Deakin, TGWU General Secretary and chairman of the union side of the FNJNC, posted a notice about the agreement at the factory. This advised the workforce of

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<sup>188</sup> Lovell, ‘What a Bloody Nerve the Ford Management Has!’

<sup>189</sup> Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 41.

<sup>190</sup> Jack Owen, ‘Ford Workers May Ask Govt. to Take Over’, *Daily Worker*, 13 March 1946, pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>191</sup> Bob Lovell, ‘Fords—the Victory for Union Recognition’, *Morning Star* (London, 16 November 1968), p. 2.

<sup>192</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 83/957, ‘Procedure for the Regulation of the Relationship Between Ford Motor Company Ltd. Dagenham and Certain Trade Unions’.

the need for 'increased output per man per hour'. Such 'a wholehearted approach' was 'in the national, as well as your own personal, interest', he instructed them.<sup>193</sup>

The rapid development of automated machine tools after the war gave this concession by union leaders greater significance. Not only did automation threaten to make workers redundant, it also set a new rhythm to work. For the company to realise the benefits of investment in such equipment, the pace of labour had to be intensified for those processes that remained manual to keep up. This accentuated the gap between official trade union negotiations and the daily experiences of workers on the shop floor at Ford.

#### **Not a Single Official Dispute since the War, 1947 to 1964**

The death of Henry Ford in 1947 and Percival Perry's retirement the following year marked another transition, both for the company and for the meaning of the term *Fordism*. As we have seen, Henry Ford and Lord Perry shared a deep antipathy towards both the new deal and organised labour. Yet, the company's peacetime fortunes only recovered within a framework of broadly Keynesian macroeconomic policies and industrial relations mediated by trade unions. Not since the early 1920s had the company thrived outside of a wartime command economy.

Whatever the apparent antinomies, state planning was required to maintain the growing consumer demand that sustained mass production. Ford's promise of the Five Dollar Day prefigured just such a positive feedback system. Making it work in practice, however, required political involvement at the level of the state. In Britain such intervention took a social democratic form, and Ford became a key player in sustaining and reaping the benefits of a new regulatory system.

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<sup>193</sup> London, National Archives, LAB 83/957, 'Notice: To Trade Union Members Employed by Ford Motor Company Limited, Dagenham'.

Before the next wave of major unrest at Dagenham, the post-war Labour government introduced an austerity budget, British troops engaged Communist forces in Malaya and Korea, and the Conservatives regained power. Then during protracted pay negotiations in spring 1952, industrial action began with a series of stoppages at Briggs. At one point a group of workers marched from the supplier's plant to the nearby Ford factory to call on their workmates at the 'parent company' to join them in demanding higher wages. One hundred women marched at the head of this demonstration, reflecting the changing composition of the workforce. Disruption to the sexual division of labour, a legacy of the wartime recruitment of women, saw such workers play a more prominent part than craftsmen in industrial action.<sup>194</sup> Women would not have such a visible role in unrest effecting Ford again for over a decade. All the same, this still signalled the start of a trend that would see exclusively male skilled labour increasingly displaced from its former position as the leadership of industrial militancy.

Then Briggs's workforce walked out indefinitely on 24 June.<sup>195</sup> Pre-empting a mass meeting scheduled for the following day, Ford management then laid off hundreds of workers without pay. In response, 15,000 of their workmates came out on strike.<sup>196</sup> To legitimise their action, a strike committee at Ford prioritised demands arising from the lay-offs. On the other hand, the issue of pay was only raised obliquely at times with references to 'other outstanding matters' in the *Daily Worker*.<sup>197</sup> Yet, national union leaders refused to make either strike official. Kevin Halpern, a senior shop steward at Briggs, later recalled how candidly Claude Berridge, a fellow Communist and local AEU official, addressed their meeting. 'I

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<sup>194</sup> Leon Griffiths, '1,500 March to Ford for 9d Hour Rise', *Daily Worker*, 14 June 1952, p. 3.

<sup>195</sup> Leon Griffiths, '9,000 Go on Strike at Briggs Bodies: Ford Workers May Follow', *Daily Worker*, 25 June 1952, p. 3.

<sup>196</sup> '15,000 out on Strike at Ford's', *Daily Worker*, 26 June 1952, p. 1.

<sup>197</sup> Peter Fryer, 'Three Points by 15,000: Ford Striker's Terms', *Daily Worker*, 2 July 1952, p. 1.

know you are correct. I know they can pay you 9 pence an hour, but it's my job to get you back to work.'<sup>198</sup> Unsurprisingly, workers then voted to remain out on strike.

These disputes coincided with the Conservative government's decision to adopt a policy to wage restraint. The *Daily Worker* argued that this position was effectively 'endorsed by the refusal of the fabulously rich Ford concern to grant demands for a wage increase'.<sup>199</sup> Union leaders still continued to oppose industrial action. Deakin, now TUC chairman as well as TGWU leader, warned that malign forces lay behind the strike. 'If the workers gave way to such influence', he cautioned, 'it would be the first nail in the coffin of the trade union movement'.<sup>200</sup> Union democracy, he implied, placed a duty on members to refrain from industrial action throughout the entire term of a contract.

The same issue of *The Times* that reported this speech of Deakin's also printed a letter signed by him, along with others, to promote the Friends of Atlantic Union, a pro-NATO pressure group. This warned of a threat to 'the prosperity and liberty of free people of the world' that Communism posed.<sup>201</sup> For the TUC General Secretary, concerns about cold war foreign policy trumped the day-to-day interests of union members.

After two weeks on strike Ford workers accepted the recommendation of officials on the FNJNC and voted to resume work, against the advice of shop stewards. Immediately afterwards management clamped down by withdrawing facilities from the stewards, even putting plant convenor Con O'Keefe back on

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<sup>198</sup> Halpin, pp. 27–28.

<sup>199</sup> George Sinfield, 'Butler's "Get Tough" Provokes Huge Battles', *Daily Worker*, 28 June 1952, p. 1.

<sup>200</sup> 'TUC and Wages: Mr Deakin's View on Policy', *The Times* (London, 9 July 1952), p. 3.

<sup>201</sup> 'Letters to the Editor: Atlantic Union a Plan for Economic Cooperation', *The Times* (London, 9 July 1952), p. 7.

full-time production work. Meanwhile, Briggs workers held out for another week to win a pay increase, if not their full claim.

Concerns raised by another TUC official afterwards made clear that the priorities of 'moderate' trade union leaders remained unchanged. The dispute at Ford provided the main case study for *How do the Communists Work?*, a 1953 pamphlet by Vic Feather published in the Background Books series. This imprint was the work of a covert, anti-Communist propaganda programme run by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's Information and Research Department (IRD).<sup>202</sup> According to Feather, by then the third most senior official at the TUC, 'the Communist Party's scheme for industrial and economic disruption' caused the 1952 strikes. To support this claim he described O'Keefe as 'a typical workman of average ability, but with no great competence as a strike organiser'. By implication, the real leadership must actually have come from Communist Party's King Street headquarters in Covent Garden. This allegation stood in stark contrast with his depiction of the firm, which was 'heavily engaged in the export trade and a blow at Ford's, therefore, would be a blow against Britain's [...] exports' according to him.<sup>203</sup> Again, 'moderate' opinion among the TUC leadership aligned with the interests of Ford and the Conservative government, rather than workers at the US subsidiary and their elected representatives.

That year also saw publication of a Labour Research Department (LRD) pamphlet *Who is Behind Them?*. In it the LRD published a leaked copy of a letter from the Federation of British Industry to its members, requesting that 'funds be found to finance the Economic League and Aims of Industry'.<sup>204</sup> This indicated a close relationship between the three organisations. Subsequently, Ford

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<sup>202</sup> John Jenks, *British Propaganda and News Media in the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 63–65, 70, 107–8.

<sup>203</sup> Victor Feather, *How Do the Communists Work?*, Background Books (London: Batchworth, 1953), pp. 29–30.

<sup>204</sup> *Who Is Behind Them?* (London: Labour Research Department, 1953). (At the time the Labour party proscribed the LRD for its links to the Communist Party.).

management revealed to a House of Commons Select Committee that the company subscribed to the Economic League, which secretly vetted all recruits to the firm for more than three decades from the 1950s onwards.<sup>205</sup>

In March 1953 one year after the two strikes, the car firm took over the body works. The motivation for this decision has since been a subject of debate. Some observers have claimed that industrial militancy at Briggs drove vertical integration, with management aiming to gain control over the supplier's workforce.<sup>206</sup> Other sources closer to the company have stressed the importance of competition between car firms. This highlighted concerns that Chrysler could acquire the body works, as indeed happened with Briggs's American parent company afterwards.<sup>207</sup> Either way, this takeover brought a workforce into Ford that was accustomed to shop stewards having a recognised role in pay negotiations.

In order to standardise terms and conditions across the two companies, management reached another national agreement with trade union officials in August 1955. Under this deal both parties agreed to the continued exclusion of shop stewards from the FNJNC. This erosion of shop-floor representation at Briggs led to 234 unofficial stoppages over the following eighteen months, before the Suez Crisis brought matters to a head. With conflict in the Middle East disrupting the flow of oil to Britain, limited petrol supplies reduced demand for cars. In response Ford dismissed 1729 workers, convincing shop stewards of the need to resist any further dismissals. Then management suspended a convenor and another steward for attending an FNJNC meeting, even though they did so at the invitation of a union official. On his return from the meeting, John McLoughlin, a Briggs steward who

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<sup>205</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *HC 176 Employment Committee. Second Report. Recruitment Practices. Minutes and Evidence Appendices and Index*, 1991, II, pp. 146–47.

<sup>206</sup> Mathews, p. 44.

<sup>207</sup> Nevins and Hill, *Ford: Decline and Rebirth, 1933-1962*, p. 399.

avoided suspension despite also being present, called a shop-floor meeting by ringing a hand bell. This led to another walk out, and the ensuing dispute became known as 'the bell ringer strike'.<sup>208</sup>

When the company dismissed McLoughlin, workers voted at a mass meeting to take strike action, but union officials quickly persuaded them back to work with reassurances that management would review McLoughlin's case. After his dismissal was upheld, another vote threatened to make industrial action official. To avert a strike the Ministry of Labour then launched a Court of Inquiry, chaired by Lord Cameron.

The *Cameron Report* met a need to appear balanced, finding fault on both sides. For instance, it documented management's reluctance to follow company procedures. All the same, the authors concluded that 'the greater measure of responsibility for the continuance of these relations rests upon the side of the workpeople', coming down firmly in favour of the company. They also warned that 'Communist influence' over the Briggs stewards was 'to the further detriment of good industrial relations' and upheld the decision to dismiss McLoughlin. The party, however, was not found to be 'the prime cause of trouble on the workers side'. Such criticism was reserved for the Shop Stewards Committee, the 'continued existence of such an uncontrolled organisation at Briggs' being deemed 'undesirable'.<sup>209</sup>

The party's role in Dagenham was cast in a different light by Kevin Halpin, when he reflected back over the influence that CPGB leader Harry Pollitt exercised over Communist shop stewards in the 1950s. 'It convinced us' he wrote 'to change the branch's strategy to *The British Road to Socialism* rather than violent

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<sup>208</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Industrial Court Act 1919. Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute at Briggs Motor Bodies Limited, Dagenham, Existing between the Ford Motor Company Limited and Members of the Trade Unions Represented on the Trade Union Side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee*, Cmnd. 131 (London: HMSO, 1957), pp. 9–13.

<sup>209</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Cmnd. 131*, p. 31.

revolution'.<sup>210</sup> The Party first published this programme in 1951, at the outset of the cold war. Dismissing claims that they intended 'to introduce Soviet Power in Britain and abolish Parliament', the authors instead presented 'the peaceful co-existence of socialism and capitalism' as a realistic possibility.<sup>211</sup> Could Communist leadership have had a moderating, rather than subversive, influence on militant Ford workers?

Some critics on the left certainly suggested as much following 1956, when Communist orthodoxy increasingly came under critical scrutiny. While the Suez Crisis made its impact felt directly at Ford, two other events that year profoundly shaped working-class politics across the world: Khrushchev's secret speech condemning Stalin and the Hungarian Uprising. After news of the Russian leader's speech reached Britain, Halpin chaired a 'rowdy' public meeting addressed by Pollitt at Barking Town Hall. He also sat on an Inner Party Democracy Commission set up at that year's Party Congress. By his own account, he found himself increasingly isolated on this body, both from a majority that continued to uphold democratic centralism and from a libertarian minority that included the historian Christopher Hill.<sup>212</sup>

As a major international split occurred within the Communist movement, Halpin remained faithful to the party. Others involved in organising at Dagenham did not, with Johnny McLoughlin 'calling for an "organized movement of the Marxist anti-Stalinist left"', as E. P. Thompson recalled afterwards.<sup>213</sup> Thompson cited McLoughlin, among others, to dismiss the characterisation of the Marxist humanist critique of Stalinism as a middle-class parlour game. Such divisions left

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<sup>210</sup> Halpin, p. 39.

<sup>211</sup> Executive Committee of the CPGB, *The British Road to Socialism: Programme Adopted by the Executive Committee of the Communist Party* (London: The Communist Party, 1951), pp. 8 & 14.

<sup>212</sup> Halpin, pp. 50–54. Most of the latter group soon left the Party to enter the emerging New Left.

<sup>213</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London: Merlin, 1978), p. 133.

the authority of the shop stewards' leadership in Dagenham, which remained close to the party, increasingly weakened.

While this rupture within the Communist movement proved disorientating and divisive for some, others took it as a moment of opportunity. Ken Weller, also a Ford steward, helped to found the libertarian socialist group Solidarity in 1960. While this organisation remained small and marginal, even by the standards of the far left in Britain, it opened up a dialogue with related political currents in France and the USA.

Solidarity was closely aligned to Socialisme ou Barbarie, a French group that emphasised the expansion of bureaucratic power in contemporary society across both sides of the iron curtain. The first issue of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* featured an extract from *The American Worker*, an account of work in the Detroit car industry written by members of the Johnston-Forrest Tendency.<sup>214</sup> This faction, then on the verge of splitting from the Socialist Workers Party, developed a theory of state capitalism, which emphasised the parallels between social relations in production within capitalist society and purportedly socialist countries. All three organisations focused on the experiences of working in the automobile sector, publishing studies by and about car workers. Their political ideas would have an influence upon the movements that emerged from the Detroit riots in 1967 and the famous *événements* in France the following May.

As well as publishing material on a range of themes from the Hungarian Uprising to the Committee of 100, including the first reissue since the 1920s of Kollontai's *The Workers' Opposition*, the journal *Solidarity* regularly reported on Ford. An early piece described the aftermath of the agreement reached in October 1961. This granted workers a forty-hour week and a modest pay rise, but also imposed new conditions on them. These included a reduction in the length of their

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<sup>214</sup> Romano.

tea break. The refusal of the workforce to cooperate with this measure forced management to withdraw the policy the following spring. Solidarity's assessment of the incident was equivocal. A somewhat grandiose claim that this represented 'a victory for all workers employed by the Company' was followed by a more realistic assessment of it as a 'red herring' that diverted attention from more important issues.<sup>215</sup> These included the gap between wages at Ford and the average for the sector, the lack of guaranteed lay-off pay, and the situation at Halewood.

Meanwhile, Ford attracted 'substantial' government aid for plans to invest £25,000,000 in a new plant at Halewood, in Liverpool (an area of high unemployment), in 1960.<sup>216</sup> Later that year a controversy arose between the unions, following the leak of an agreement between the company, the AEU, and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers (NUGMW). This revealed that the two unions had agreed to employment terms in Merseyside that breached the national agreement, including longer working hours and lower wages, in return for exclusive recognition rights at Halewood. While this attempt to exclude other unions from the new plant quickly derailed, it took *unofficial* overtime bans initiated by craftsmen at the plant for workers there to gain parity with the rest of Ford's workforce.<sup>217</sup>

Later that year Henry Ford II also announced a planned buy out of other shareholders in the British subsidiary by the Ford Motor Company. He added that the parent company's stake 'would far exceed its interests in all other operations outside the United States combined' and that the purchase would 'permit full coordination of the operations' between the two countries.<sup>218</sup> This £128,000,000

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<sup>215</sup> 'News from Fords', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 2.3 (1962), 3–4.

<sup>216</sup> 'Ford Going Ahead at Merseyside: Substantial Aid from Government', *Financial Times* (London, 23 March 1960), p. 1.

<sup>217</sup> Ken Weller, 'The Defeat at Fords: Some Lessons', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 3.8 (1965), 22–26 (p. 23), emphasis in the original.

<sup>218</sup> 'American Assurances on Ford Bid', *The Times* (London, 21 November 1960), p. 10.

investment was linked to the introduction of a more combative 'Detroit' style of management at the firm.<sup>219</sup> Managers also began a campaign to persuade stewards of the need for greater competitiveness, in preparation for the United Kingdom's 1961 application for membership of the European Economic Community, warning them that European economic integration would lead to further consolidation in the automobile sector.<sup>220</sup>

The next year tensions flared up again in Dagenham, following a pay agreement in which union officials formally acknowledged management's right to clamp down on unofficial action. Within a week Bill Francis, a Communist shop steward in the assembly plant, called a meeting with a group of workers during their lunch break. This was to discuss management's latest response in an ongoing dispute over manning levels. Managers then used the fact that this meeting took place on company premises as a pretext to dismiss Francis.

Predictably enough, this led to an immediate walk out in the assembly plant, and workers voted for strike action in a series of mass meetings. Yet again, union officials persuaded them to return to work, claiming that Lesley Blakeman, Ford's Labour Relations Manager, had made a verbal guarantee against further dismissals. Then during a phased resumption of work, Management made 'redundancies' targeted at those workers they deemed undesirable.<sup>221</sup>

After a protracted series of negotiations seventeen workers remained suspended and pressure grew on the unions to back industrial action. On 6 November Minister of Labour John Hare gave Cabinet colleagues his assessment of the situation. 'The employer's object had been to remove a small number of persistent and politically-minded trouble makers; this was a sensible aim which the unions might have been persuaded to support had the employers played their hand

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<sup>219</sup> Mathews, p. 45; Gambino, 'Ford britannica', pp. 181–82.

<sup>220</sup> Eddie Stanton, 'Inside the Fords Defeat', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 3.11 (1965), 10–21 (p. 11).

<sup>221</sup> Joint Ford Shop Stewards Committee, pp. 8–10.

with greater tact'.<sup>222</sup> Having received notice of official action from the unions, he set out plans to prevent the dispute re-escalating.

This took the form of another Court of Inquiry, chaired this time by D. T. Jack Esquire. This led union officials to call off industrial action. The *Jack Report* gave an accurate account for how the rules for electing stewards at Ford had weakened ties between workers and trade union officials. According to these procedures, individual workers generally elected representatives based on their location, irrespective of their specific union affiliation. Workers voted for stewards and stewards represented workers from across different unions. The report still went on to place 'responsibility for poor industrial relations on unions', singling out their 'inability [...] to exercise effective control over the Shop Stewards'.<sup>223</sup> Yet again, the stewards took the blame for a situation that arose, as the report's authors recognised, because of the terms of a deal management had struck with union officials without consulting any of the lay representatives. Indeed, such arrangements were deliberately designed to marginalise shop stewards from formal negotiating channels. No wonder then that they resorted to other means.

Halpin, one of the seventeen to lose their jobs, later described 'great pressure from the CPGB to get all the shops out in solidarity' during the strike. Afterwards he acknowledged such a strategy might have been misguided. After all, workers in the assembly plant had the capacity of to halt Ford's production without such support.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> London, National Archives, CAB 128/36/66, 'Conclusions of a Meeting of the Cabinet at Admiralty House, S.W.1, on Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1962 at 10.30 a.m.' pp. 477-78.

<sup>223</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Industrial Courts Act, 1919. Report of a Court of Inquiry into the Causes and Circumstances of a Dispute between the Ford Motor Company, Limited, Dagenham and the Members of the Trade Unions Represented on the Trade Union Side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee*, Cmnd. 1999 (London: HMSO, 1963), p. 51.

<sup>224</sup> Halpin, p. 69.

Former Communist Eddie Stanton, another of the sacked stewards, made more blunt criticisms. He claimed that ‘party stewards and members were in total confusion’ during the dispute.<sup>225</sup> Meanwhile, Weller offered a rueful assessment of the predicament faced by Ford workers. ‘Not a single dispute at Fords since the war has been “official”. The trade union officials have even signed a long series of agreements which have had the effect of undermining shop-floor struggles.’<sup>226</sup> This was a turning point, he suggested. Workers could no longer take the claims of union officials to act on their behalf credibly. Doing so had been the Shop Stewards Committee’s gravest error.

While the Jack Court of Inquiry continued its deliberations, Halewood came fully into operation. On 8 March 1963 journalists and cameramen witnessed the assembly of the first Ford Anglia car produced at the plant, accompanied by a running commentary over the factory’s loudspeakers. As this spectacle reached its climax, ‘the Lord mayor of Liverpool took the wheel and drove the car off the line through a triumphal arch’, while the Ford band played the lively overture from Franz von Suppé’s comic opera *Jolly Robbers*.<sup>227</sup>

The mood of celebration was marred, however, by an ongoing overtime ban by workers at the plant in opposition to pay differentials between Halewood and the firm’s other factories. Attention was drawn to this issue by the transfer of toolmakers from Dagenham to Merseyside, since they still received higher pay for a shorter week compared to locally recruited labour. Ford’s policy at Halewood made clear management’s lack of commitment to the national agreement, a point conveniently overlooked in the *Jack Report*.

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<sup>225</sup> Stanton, p. 16.

<sup>226</sup> Weller, p. 22.

<sup>227</sup> ‘Halewood’s First Car Moves to Music: Anglia Amid Overtime Ban’, *Guardian*, 9 March 1963, p. 4.

## Chapter Conclusion

In the early twentieth century Ford began to produce cars in Britain, soon after operations began in America, amid an international revolt of labour. This move came before two of the main innovations associated with the corporation, the automated assembly line and the company's experiments with a high-wage policy. In 1914 the final assembly line began to flow in Manchester, the same year as in Dearborn, while the British subsidiary even helped inspire pay policy.

As in America, such measures promised a solution to the ongoing crisis British capitalism faced between the wars. This served though as political ideology, spiritual doctrine even, rather than as an effective economic response to Britain's relative industrial decline and intensifying international class conflict. Public investment in Ford's move to Dagenham then heralded the approach of a Fordist system of regulation. Much more widespread state intervention was required, however, to make this a reality after the Second World War. A golden era of British social democracy was intrinsically bound up with mass production in a relationship of interdependence. Ford represented the form of work this system was based upon, both symbolically and economically. Meanwhile, these policies created the social peace and effective demand required to sustain growth. Indeed, Ford played a more central economic role in Britain, as a key exporter and leading investor, than in the USA, where the corporation faced more efficient competition.

Seeking to give voice to the workers who built this system, the politics of working-class autonomy emerged in the USA, France and Italy. This tendency grappled with the parallels between contemporary capitalism and actual existing socialism, both systems requiring rigid labour discipline and an unprecedented degree of state planning. Such politics were first articulated in Britain from 1960 onwards by Solidarity, a group with close links to Ford's workforce.

## 2. Gathering Storm Clouds, 1964 to 1970

The storm clouds are gathering but [...] I manage to keep a sense of proportion. I am merely fascinated by the almost impossibility of a social democratic government running capitalism.<sup>228</sup>

Barbara Castle, *Diary*, 31 May 1968

I was wondering, is it worth considering whether you could include in your legislation provision to generalise the Ford-type agreement, providing for a weekly payment into a holiday fund or other fund designed to provide a collective reward for the workers, again, on Ford lines dependent each week on good behaviour?<sup>229</sup>

Harold Wilson, Minute to Barbara Castle, 3 April 1969

In the late 1960s Ford came increasingly to serve as a template for the ill-fated policies of Harold Wilson's Labour government. At one point the Prime Minister even suggested to Barbara Castle, Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity, that the whole of British industry should adopt the precise terms of the firm's employment contract. Government proposals for industrial relations legislation came about directly in response to the 1968 Ford sewing machinists' strike. The following year ministers attempted to implement this policy in the aftermath of a national pay strike at the car firm, dividing the party and contributing to its defeat in the 1970 general election.

Events surrounding this debacle followed their own particular trajectory within a specific British context. Yet, the automobile sector also became an international hub of unrest, amid the wider social upheaval of the late 1960s. A

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<sup>228</sup> Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964-70* (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1984), p. 454.

<sup>229</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 13/2725, Harold Wilson, 'Prime Minister's Personal Minute No. 25/69', 3 April 1969.

series of volatile disturbances erupted year on year: the 1967 Detroit Riots; the occupation of French car factories in May and June 1968; and unrest at Fiat Mirafiori, during Italy's Hot Autumn (l'autunno caldo) in 1969.

This chapter focuses on unrest at the Ford Motor Company (Limited) during the first Wilson government from 1964 to 1970. In doing so, it traces how the international social upheaval then unfolding began to influence events at this US subsidiary's British car plants. The impact of these was then felt well beyond the factory.

### **Britain's Top Exporting Company, 1964 to 1967**

Two points were key to how the fate of British social democracy became so closely enmeshed with the fortunes of the subsidiary of an American carmaker. The first was Ford's position within Britain's industrial landscape; and the other was the set of structural and ideological factors driving government strategy. The firm's self-image was revealing on the first points. Take, for instance, a statement issued in January 1967 to announce publication of the previous year's annual report:

The company said that the tremendous overseas reception of the new Cortina had helped to lift the company's earnings to a new record, consolidating its position as Britain's top exporting company and representing the most important single contribution to the balance of payments by any single company.

This confident assertion of financial strength and importance for the national economy was followed by an abrupt shift in tone. Assistant Managing Director Leonard Crossman went on to strike a note of caution: 'We are in a capital intensive industry demanding high and intensive investment', he warned. This explained

how such record earnings and exports could coincide with the lowest profits recorded since the 1940s.<sup>230</sup>

By the standards of the British automobile sector at least, this outlook appears to have been unduly pessimistic. The company's profits averaged over £25,000,000 per annum over the course of the 1960s, about four times that year's reported figure. Yet, publication of such low profits alongside record earnings highlighted what it was that set the firm apart from its competitors, Ford's capital-intensive corporate strategy. While not the largest car manufacturer in Britain, the company led the British sector in terms of profitability by reinvesting in fixed capital at a higher rate than domestic rivals.<sup>231</sup>

This meant that the amount spent on plant and machinery relative to wages exceeded that of the rest of the British automobile sector, a particularly capital intensive branch of industry in general. In Marxist terms, this ratio of constant capital to variable capital is referred to as organic composition. Marx associated just such a change in organic composition with an immanent tendency for the rate of profit to fall within capitalist society.<sup>232</sup> This implied that the ever-increasing volume of investment in fixed capital at the expense of wages constituted a key source of crisis for capitalism. The prominence of industrial action by autoworkers within an international context of major social unrest strongly suggested the salience of such analysis to the situation.

The Italian Marxist Ferruccio Gambino developed the point, arguing that the relatively high level of organic composition at Ford gave particular political significance to the firm and its workforce. Both played a leading role precisely because they were atypical of the wider British automobile sector. Moreover, for

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<sup>230</sup> 'End of Year Statement Carries News of Gloom and Boom: Profits Down!', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees*, 8.243 (1967), 1.

<sup>231</sup> See 'Figure 10.1' Rhys, pp. 361–70.

<sup>232</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin/New Left Review, 1981), III, p. 319.

Gambino, it was workers' struggle that drove investment and not vice versa.<sup>233</sup> Too literal a reading of Gambino's identification of this vanguard subject, along with his focus on working-class struggle as a motor for history, is open to question. While social reality was no doubt more complex, such passages need to be interpreted as part of a broader critique of the Leninist vanguard party, determinist tendencies within Marxism and a turn away from industrial politics by some on the new left. Crucially, Gambino offered an accurate assessment of how Ford would increasingly become a strategic point for political intervention by those who recognised the agency of the firm's workforce as the crisis intensified.

Signs also began to suggest that the parent company's investment priorities were starting to shift elsewhere. In 1967 the formation of Ford of Europe marked the beginning of a process to integrate operations transnationally, signalling the importance of the European market for the firm. Two years later output in Britain, which had been second only to Detroit since the 1930s, fell below that of Ford's German subsidiary.<sup>234</sup>

German membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) clearly favoured the expansion of production at Ford Werke. Nevertheless, the location of a new European headquarters in Brentwood, Essex, demonstrated the corporation's ongoing interest in maintaining a major stake in British industry. Indeed, the firm's output in Britain continued to rival that of Germany for years to come. In such circumstances, management's vocal and influential advocacy of Britain joining the EEC was hardly surprising. This objective was shared by the Wilson administration, but proved divisive with trade unionists and many to the left of the government.

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<sup>233</sup> Gambino, *Workers' Struggle*, pp. 1–2; Gambino, 'Ford britannica', pp. 147–48.

<sup>234</sup> See 'Table 10' in Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, p. 144.

Other aspects of Ford's business model also took on greater political significance as a result of a series of speculative attacks by currency traders, in what became known as the Sterling Crisis. Within weeks of Wilson's election the pound started to come under pressure, culminating with the devaluation of sterling from \$2.80 to \$2.40 in June 1967.<sup>235</sup> This increasingly focused government attention on the contribution made to the balance of payments by Britain's top exporting company, both through international trade and the domestic reinvestment of the British subsidiary's profits. Increasingly, the aspirations of government ministers to deliver Labour's economic plan became predicated upon Ford's commercial performance.

The pound's vulnerability to currency speculators reflected structural weaknesses in the British economy. These included sterling's overvaluation and exposure as an international reserve currency, as well as a low rate of industrial investment. It took overseas military expenditure, though, to push the balance of payments into deficit—a point not lost on critics of the government on the far left at the time. For instance, Tony Cliff and Colin Barker of the International Socialists attacked the Wilson administration's management of the economy. Addressing shop stewards, they warned that 'an Incomes Policy under capitalism must necessarily be an anti-working-class measure', which would suppress wages that already lagged behind rates of pay in other northern European countries.<sup>236</sup> All the same, attempting to control inflation by imposing deflationary wage settlements became central to government policy.

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<sup>235</sup> For a chronology of these events, see Michael D. Bordo, Ronald MacDonald, and Michael J. Oliver, 'Sterling in Crisis, 1964-1967', *European Review of Economic History*, 13.3 (2009), 437–59 (pp. 439–44).

<sup>236</sup> T. Cliff and C. Barker, *Incomes Policy, Legislation and Shop Stewards* (Harrow Weald: London Industrial Shop Stewards Defence Committee, 1966). A foreword by Reg Birch, a Communist AEU official who negotiated with Ford, highlights the direct relevance of this pamphlet to the firm's history.

While previous administrations had intermittently adopted similar measures since the Second World War, this was the first elected with a commitment to do so in its manifesto. 'Pay norms', which had previously only set voluntary guidelines for the private sector, became legally enforceable limits under the Prices and Incomes Act 1966. The following year wage increases were restricted to those that made 'a direct contribution to increasing productivity', making productivity bargaining and schemes to rationalise pay structures the order of the day.<sup>237</sup> Just such a job evaluation programme was already underway at Ford, having been announced to the workforce the previous April.<sup>238</sup> This became a high-profile test case for a central component of government policy.

Meanwhile, industrial unrest erupted at Ford with increased frequency over the course of the mid-1960s, having reached a low ebb after the defeat of the shop stewards in the Bill Francis affair. Time lost to industrial action had plummeted from around 750,000 man-hours to fewer than 35,000 between 1962 and 1963. It then increased fivefold over the next two years.<sup>239</sup>

Sir Patrick Hennessy, the firm's Chairman and President of the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders, described the situation in Britain's car factories as a 'national stigma'. His outlook for the sector's immediate future, however, remained remarkably upbeat. 'It is my conviction now', he said, 'following the latest moves—the co-operative action between the industry, the trade unions and the Government—that it may not be long before we can see the beginning of action to prevent unofficial stoppages'.<sup>240</sup> Hennessy was referring to talks with ministers that autumn, which led to the formation of the Motor Industry Joint Labour Council (MIJLC). This mediation body was made up of industry representatives and

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<sup>237</sup> Prices and Incomes Act 1966, s 15 (i) (i).

<sup>238</sup> 'Wages Survey and the Questions You Raised', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees*, 19 April 1966, p. 20.

<sup>239</sup> 'A Trial of Strength at Dagenham', *Financial Times* (London, 2 February 1966), p. 6.

<sup>240</sup> 'Britain's "Stigma"', *Evening Standard*, 12 October 1965, p. 16.

national trade union officials. As a consensus emerged between Britain's Labour government and industrial leaders on the need to tackle shop-floor militancy, union officials came under conflicting demands. Should they collaborate with the state and management in the 'national interest', or defend the interests of their members?

Ford management took this opportunity to make a 'test case' of a dispute with a group of paint sprayers in Dagenham. Disagreement initially centred on two issues. These were the rate of an 'abnormal conditions allowance' for this hazardous work and the length of 'relief time' between periods in the paint booths. While the question of pay was resolved quickly, official negotiations failed to reach agreement on the latter point. Nevertheless, managers attempted to impose shorter breaks on the sprayers in January 1966. Unsurprisingly, this led all 151 of them to walk out. The company then laid thousands of their workmates off without pay.<sup>241</sup> Acting with 'unusual speed', as the *Financial Times* reported, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) responded by making the strike official.<sup>242</sup>

The matter came before an MIJLC inquiry, led by the council's chairman Mr A. J. Scamp. The Ministry of Labour defined this council's remit over 'disputes leading to unofficial strikes [...] in breach of procedures'.<sup>243</sup> Intervention in this case involved a broad interpretation of these terms of reference, since industrial action began after procedures had been exhausted and quickly became official. Management and the unions still agreed to the inquiry and accepted the recommendation to compromise over the length of breaks. Remarkably, it found national officials and managers responsible for how this situation unfolded, rather

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<sup>241</sup> 'Scamp May Act in Ford Paint-Shop Dispute', *Financial Times* (London, 27 January 1966), p. 13.

<sup>242</sup> 'A Trial of Strength at Dagenham'.

<sup>243</sup> Ministry of Labour Motor Industry Joint Labour Council, *Report by Mr. A. J. Scamp on the Activities of the Council* (London: HMSO, 1966), p. 5.

than following the by now familiar script of laying most of the blame with the shop stewards.<sup>244</sup>

This surprise outcome encouraged other Ford workers, foundrymen and toolmakers among them, to raise fresh demands of their own. A former personnel manager described how a series of 'leapfrogging' claims threatened to challenge management's prerogative and undermine the firm's pay policies.<sup>245</sup> It also clearly posed a challenge to a government committed to pay restraint.

In order to reassert management authority, Ford unveiled detailed proposals for a job-evaluation scheme that April. This entailed new job titles for the entire hourly-paid workforce. A more hierarchical pay structure was created. This replaced three existing categories of male manual workers—skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled—with five new grades (A-E). In addition, women workers, who had been previously allocated to their own band at the lowest rates of pay, were integrated into this system at eighty-five per cent of the equivalent male rate.<sup>246</sup>

The initial response of the workforce was hostile. A national meeting of TGWU shop stewards almost decided to 'turn down the scheme and put in a new claim' for a straightforward pay increase.<sup>247</sup> Only after a vote on this proposal came to a dead-heat, did they decide by a narrow majority to discuss the company's proposal with management. A month into negotiations three hundred workers at the Dagenham assembly plant took unofficial strike action over their grade allocation. *The Times* described this as 'the tip of the iceberg', warning of 'hundreds

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<sup>244</sup> 'Scamp Report Praises Ford Shop Stewards', *Financial Times* (London, 26 February 1966), p. 5.

<sup>245</sup> Friedman and Meredeem, p. 43; See also, Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 84, which appears to cite Stanley Gillen, describing the subsequent sewing machinists strike as 'leapfrogging'.

<sup>246</sup> 'New Job Titles and Grades', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees*, 8.250 (1968), 1 & 8-9.

<sup>247</sup> 'Talks on Ford's New Pay Plan', *Financial Times* (London, 18 April 1967), p. 20.

of objections in the review pipeline'.<sup>248</sup> The following month a two-day strike by paint sprayers, again over grading, led to the entire workforce being laid off from the Halewood Paint, Trim and Assembly (PTA) Plant. A cascade of unofficial action by shop-floor workers threatened to undermine the entire settlement.

Meanwhile, job evaluation gave many shop stewards their first formal role at Ford. The company had granted these representatives recognition back in 1946. Aside from a handful of Joint Works Committee (JWC) delegates, however, most stewards still had no formal way of raising day-to-day issues about working conditions with management. Moreover, pay contract negotiations remained the sole prerogative of officials on the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC). For many of those shop stewards previously left with no actual official role, the programme began to open up new opportunities to participate in the various committees that conducted and reviewed job evaluations.

Henry Friedman, a former-convener at the Dagenham River Plant, reflected back on the effect of this newly acquired responsibility. 'It was', he wrote, 'a classic example of how trade union representatives can become fascinated with the routines of management and absorbed by them'.<sup>249</sup> This built upon a more cooperative relationship that a new generation of industrial relations managers had already begun to establish with a number of senior stewards and convenors, in return for improved facilities.<sup>250</sup> However gradually and unevenly, a process of integration began to extend down from union officials towards the shop stewards despite Ford's longstanding hostility to rank-and-file trade unionism.

After five months of negotiations and sporadic industrial action, Ford eventually announced a new agreement on 21 September 1967. By then local

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<sup>248</sup> Alex Hendry, 'Grading Trouble for Ford', *The Times* (London, 20 March 1967), p. 26.

<sup>249</sup> Friedman and Merdeen, p. 67.

<sup>250</sup> Bernie Passingham, another former convenor, interviewed by Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 82.

productivity deals covered ninety-eight per cent of the company's manual workforce with an average increase of two pounds per week gained under the new contract.<sup>251</sup> Managers appeared to have successfully achieved their objectives. These comprised of a two-year package deal, based on the job evaluation scheme, with productivity deals at a plant level.

A month later Harold Wilson opened Ford's new research and engineering centre at Dunton in Essex. In a speech, which was widely reported at the time, Wilson warned that 'if we in Britain are to stay in the forefront of modern technological industry in the decades ahead it is vitally important that we should invest now'. He then praised the firm for establishing 'exactly the sort of facilities, equipment and conditions which were needed much more widely in industry'.<sup>252</sup> The company's new infrastructure provided a physical manifestation of Wilson's technocratic vision for Britain's future, as famously evoked by his depiction of a nation 'forged in the white heat' of a technological revolution.<sup>253</sup> The firm's pay policy was to become of even greater political importance.

### **The Gravest Labour Relations Situation, 1968**

As the Prime Minister delivered his panegyric on Ford, the issue of grading remained an ongoing point of contention. Among those to still contest their job evaluation were a group of sewing machinists who assembled car upholstery. This almost entirely female workforce had been assigned to a semi-skilled grade 'B', despite a recruitment process that required applicants to pass an entry test. Since the only two male roles to share such a requirement received a higher grade 'C', the

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<sup>251</sup> John Elliott, '40,000 Ford Workers to Receive £2 a Week Rise', *Financial Times* (London, 22 September 1967), p. 1.

<sup>252</sup> 'Mr Wilson Decries "Wasteage"', *The Times* (London, 13 October 1967), p. 2.

<sup>253</sup> Labour Party, *Report of the 62nd Annual Labour Party Conference Held in the Spa Grand Hotel, Scarborough, September 30 to October 4, 1963* (London: Labour Party, 1963), p. 140.

women saw this as a clear case of sex discrimination. This view was confirmed by their understanding that the role had also been assigned to grade 'C' at one stage in the job evaluation process, before then being downgraded.<sup>254</sup>

Management and shop steward accounts of the circumstances that led up to industrial action came out in evidence to a subsequent Court of Inquiry. Both confirmed that the National Union of Vehicle Builders (NUVB) first contested the machinists' grading the previous summer. The company case then represented management as having followed procedures to a 'T', while claiming that union representatives had generally failed to do so. By way of contrast, shop stewards and the convenor portrayed the relevant committees as 'clogged up with outstanding cases', while highlighting the inconsistency of management in resolving other claims informally. The refusal of the company to disclose the formula used to weigh job evaluation scores into different grades also suggested foul play to union representatives, a claim denied by management.<sup>255</sup>

In any case, the sewing machinists understandably felt aggrieved. A few days after declaring an overtime ban, they held a one-day strike on 29 May 1968. After further negotiations failed to make progress, they walked out again on Friday 8 June, pre-empting another one-day strike planned for the following week. Only then, was the issue of equal pay raised by 'the leadership', in other words not by the women themselves but by the River Plant Shop Stewards Committee. This change in strategy aimed to secure official union backing, as well as wider support, for their cause. The women's initial response was sceptical: 'But we have never even asked for it.' According to Friedman, the women only agreed to the new demand afterwards at a mass meeting. A delegation then lobbied the Headquarters of the

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<sup>254</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Industrial Courts Act 1919. Report of a Court of Inquiry under Sir Jack Scamp into a Dispute Concerning Sewing Machinists Employed by the Ford Motor Company Limited*, Cmnd. 3749 (London: HMSO, 1968), p. 26.

<sup>255</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Scamp Report*, pp. 18–21.

AEF (Amalgamated Union of Engineering and Foundry Workers), a union representing only six out of almost two hundred Dagenham sewing machinists. The executive agreed to make the strike official, but 'purely and solely in support of the principle of Equal Pay'.<sup>256</sup>

One of those on strike Violet Dawson later explained the women's reticence about this demand: 'We didn't want equal pay because if we'd got that, we would have had to have done shift work and we didn't have the cover for the kids.'<sup>257</sup> Indeed, management had previously offered to reduce differentials between male and female wage rates 'subject to agreement in principle on shift working by women employees'.<sup>258</sup> While the firm was open to negotiation on this point, the sewing machinists had to take into consideration their availability to do unpaid housework before raising a demand that risked extending their working day within the factory.

Paradoxically perhaps, the dual role many of these women played as both wage labourers and unwaged housewives may also have actually made it easier for them to withdraw their labour from Ford. The sewing machinists' marginal position within the factory meant that their households were less likely to depend on their wages to meet everyday living costs. Another remark made by Violet Dawson certainly suggested as much: 'My money bought us all the extras.'<sup>259</sup> In so far as their income supplemented the family wage of a male 'breadwinner', the archetypal situation of the Fordist household, the company had relatively weak leverage over these women.

One week into the strike the NUVB, the union to which most of the sewing machinists belonged, joined the AEF in officially backing industrial action. With car

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<sup>256</sup> Friedman and Meredeem, pp. 140–43.

<sup>257</sup> Interviewed by Yvonne Roberts, *Mad about Women: Can There Ever Be Fair Play between the Sexes* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 215.

<sup>258</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Scamp Report*, p. 37.

<sup>259</sup> Interviewed by Yvonne Roberts, p. 215.

production 'drastically curtailed', management then threatened to lay off thousands of their male colleagues. All this came at 'a crucial time in Ford's major campaign [...] to boost annual exports to £225m', as the *Financial Times* reported, prompting government intervention to resolve the dispute.<sup>260</sup>

Having been recently appointed to a newly created ministerial post overseeing both employment and incomes policies, Barbara Castle then held discussions with union officials in her office. She began by announcing another Court of Inquiry, emphasised the impact of the strike in terms of trade and asked for help to get the women back to work. Individual union officials responded differently. Reg Birch of the AEF backed the strike over equal pay, Alf Roberts of the NUVB supported the original claim and all the others opposed industrial action. Castle interpreted the strike crudely as a 'political' attempt by Communists to 'sabotage' moderate officials in their efforts to resist unconstitutional rank-and-file action. She drew broader conclusions from this, with much wider implications. 'Certainly this particular case', Castle wrote in her diary, 'throws doubt on the efficacy of the Donovan remedies'.<sup>261</sup> The Ford sewing machinists strike suggested to her the need to go beyond the Royal Commission's recommendations to reform industrial relations, but still leave them on a voluntary basis. Instead, she began to consider the use of legal sanctions against workers who took unofficial action.

After managers and sewing machinists attended another meeting in her office, Castle noted in her diary the 'imperative to get work resumed before export orders were irreparably lost'. She also recorded the main concern of Ford's Labour Relations Manager Leslie Blakeman. 'If the girls were upgraded', he warned her, 'nothing could prevent the thousands of men workers from demanding

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<sup>260</sup> John Elliott, 'Ministry Acts as Ford Strike Hits Export Orders', *Financial Times* (London, 15 June 1968).

<sup>261</sup> Castle, pp. 465–66.

reconsideration of their grading too'.<sup>262</sup> To prevent another such cycle of leapfrogging claims, he instead offered them ninety-two per cent of the male rate for grade 'B'. Without yielding to their demand for recognition of their skill, this resulted in a higher pay increase than would have arisen from meeting the original claim.

This soon brought to an end a strike, which had by then spread to Halewood, shut down the British subsidiary's entire car output and resulted in thousands of lay off. Meanwhile, the Court of Inquiry continued with its work. When the Scamp Report came out that August, it gave a detailed account of the dispute, documenting the views of management, union officials and shop stewards. Its findings were, however, less balanced and essentially favourable to the company. It also sidestepped the main question it had been set up to address, with a recommendation that an *ad hoc* committee re-assess the sewing machinists' grade.<sup>263</sup>

Giving evidence, Blakeman referred to the strike as 'the gravest labour relations situation' in Ford's 'long turbulent history', in which 'the whole weakness of the British structure of industrial relations' could be seen.<sup>264</sup> However intrinsic the issue of sex discrimination was to this dispute, Sheila Cohen has made a compelling case that it should be viewed primarily in relation to the demands and actions of other Ford workers. Crucially, such an approach has the virtue of corresponding with many of the women's own memories.<sup>265</sup>

However, a letter received by the Prime Minister from 'women workers of Ford' suggested that the issue of equal pay also became entangled with the shop-floor tactic of submitting 'leap frogging' wage claims in this case:

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<sup>262</sup> Castle, p. 474.

<sup>263</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Scamp Report*, pp. 44–46.

<sup>264</sup> 'Both Sides of the Story', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees* (Dagenham, 5 July 1968), special edition, pp. 7–10 (p. 7).

<sup>265</sup> Sheila Cohen, 'Equal Pay — or What? Economics, Politics and the 1968 Ford Sewing Machinists' Strike', *Labour History*, 53.1 (2012), 51–68.

[...] we will not go back to work, we are fighting a great fight equal pay for women, we at Fords have started the ball rolling our unions are backing us, funds are coming in we're all set for battle, Fords is the beginning, soon it will be every industry in Britain out because of us women of Fords, we will force you to give us all equal pay, or strike with our unions blessing [...]<sup>266</sup>

While the tone of this tirade was more blue-collar than bluestocking and its origins remain unclear, the letter gives the impression that the possibility of raising a demand for equal pay did not entirely pass by all these women at the time.

More significantly, the strike directly inspired the formation of the National Joint Action Campaign Committee for Women's Equal Rights (NJACCWER), the unofficial leadership for the ensuing campaign for equal pay.<sup>267</sup> Neither government nor employer met this demand at the time. Ford merely reduced pay differentials, without recognising the women's skill, while Barbara Castle refused to let progress towards equal pay jeopardise the overall pay ceiling, when Parliament passed a new Prices and Incomes Bill that June.<sup>268</sup> NJACCWER set out a very different position at a Trades Union Congress (TUC) 'discussion conference' (i.e. one without authority to make policy) on equal pay that autumn. A delegate, who supported the campaign, made this position clear: 'Many men in manual industries are on very low basic rates and they need higher wages just as much as women need equal pay.'<sup>269</sup> NJACCWER supporters shared a sense of class solidarity with the Ford Sewing Machinists. This included a keen awareness that their demands

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<sup>266</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 13/2412, Letter to 'Dear Mr Wilson' from 'Women Workers of Ford', June 1968.

<sup>267</sup> Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (London: Davis Poynter, 1980), pp. 279–80.

<sup>268</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates: Commons, Fifth Series, 1967-68*, DCCLXVII, cols 500-22.

<sup>269</sup> Trades Union Congress, *Equal Pay: Report of a Conference at Congress House, London, November 21, 1968* (London: Trades Union Congress, 1968).

risked being turned against themselves, as well as their male workmates and relatives.

While the working women who raised the demand for equal pay sought to navigate a course within the trade union movement, the Labour government's position converged increasingly with that of Ford management. Over lunch with other senior Ford executives that December, Blakeman presented his plans for a new productivity deal to Barbara Castle. This included a 'novel' financial penalty for unofficial action, as she observed in her diary.<sup>270</sup> In the New Year she published her own industrial relations strategy, which mirrored that of the company, in the white paper *In Place of Strife*, a title that proved ironic. This set out proposals for legislation granting ministerial powers to call off industrial action that was 'unconstitutional or in which for other reasons adequate joint discussions have not taken place' and to impose secret ballots before strike action.<sup>271</sup>

The *Donovan Report*, which came out just after the strike began, identified 'the rapidly growing number of unofficial and unconstitutional strikes in this country' as a major cause for concern.<sup>272</sup> However, instead of simply holding workers or shop stewards responsible for the situation, its authors saw the lack of institutional structures at a plant level as the main source of this problem. Without entirely ruling out legal sanctions for unofficial action, their report explicitly held back from recommending such measures. Instead, it proposed to integrate shop stewards into the formal collective bargaining system to encourage workers' participation, while maintaining the essentially voluntary status of employment agreements under the current legal framework.

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<sup>270</sup> Castle, p. 570.

<sup>271</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *In Place of Strife: A Policy for Industrial Relations, Presented to Parliament by the First Secretary and Secretary of State for Employment and Productivity by Command of Her Majesty January 1969*, Cmnd. 3888 (London: HMSO, 1969), p. 5.

<sup>272</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, 1965-1968, Chairman: The Rt. Hon. Lord Donovan*, Cmnd. 3623 (London: HMSO, 1968), p. 117.

While the report suggested the need to reform industrial relations, Barbara Castle took a much more one-sided approach than the recommendations of its authors. Rather than just another symptom, unofficial action became for her the cause of all the problems with British industrial relations. This might seem all the more remarkable at a time when, for instance, the unions that represented the overwhelming majority of Ford's workforce could still be outvoted on the FNJNC by those representing craftsmen.<sup>273</sup>

Such details were lost on Labour ministers who had recently faced a series of disastrous local and by-election results, as the sterling crisis undermined government attempts at economic planning. With the Conservatives adopting an increasingly aggressive stance towards trade unionism, the 'quasi-corporatist vision' set out in the white paper aimed to outflank the opposition and keep a lid on inflation.<sup>274</sup> This rightward shift on the part of the government coincided a move to the left in trade-union politics, which promised greater decentralisation, shop-floor representation and local bargaining, making conflict increasingly likely.

As state intervention to set wages became a key macroeconomic lever, industrial relations came to the centre of the policy agenda. In April 1965 a Royal Commission, chaired by Lord Donovan, had been appointed 'to consider relations between management and employees and the role of trade unions and employers' associations'.<sup>275</sup> Ford managers, union officials and shop stewards all submitted evidence to the Donovan Commission, contributing to a wider public debate on workers' participation and industrial democracy. At the time major international

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<sup>273</sup> 'Early Ballot Might Have Averted the Dagenham Disaster', *Sunday Times* (London, 2 March 1969), p. 4.

<sup>274</sup> Andrew Thorpe, 'The Labour Party and the Trade Unions', in *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics: The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79*, ed. by John McLroy, Nina Fishman, and Alan Campbell, *Studies in Labour History* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), II, 133-50 (p. 139).

<sup>275</sup> Parliamentary Papers. House of Commons, *Royal Commission on Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, 1965-1968, Chairman: The Rt. Hon. Lord Donovan*, p. iii.

labour conferences also confronted the same issues, highlighting that developments in Britain generally and Ford specifically need to be viewed within an international context of escalating industrial and social unrest.<sup>276</sup>

While Labour government policy converged with the agenda of industrial leaders upon a shared agenda of *workers' participation*, the position of the trade unions remained contested. One indication of this came from the growth in size and influence of a series of conferences on the theme of workers' control. These set out to formulate a 'democratic reply to the technocratic pressures for an incomes policy', in response to 'the demand that the unions be increasingly integrated into the State machinery for control of industrial relations'.

From the outset *Union Voice*, a rank-and-file trade union newspaper, helped coordinate these events. A report of their earliest meeting appeared in a special 'first Factory edition—for the workers at Fords'<sup>277</sup>—which also featured a section edited by the Shop Stewards Committee in Dagenham. Over the years, members and officials from a growing number of unions joined delegates representing an increasingly broad spectrum of left-wing political opinion. Representatives of a plethora of revolutionary socialist groups and student activists took part in discussions with Communist Party members and even Labour MPs.<sup>278</sup>

Established at the 1968 conference, the Institute for Workers Control (IWC) gained prominent support from the election of two senior, left-wing union officials Hugh Scanlon, president of the AEF, and Jack Jones, General Secretary of the

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<sup>276</sup> ICT and ICF, *ICF International Conference on Industrial Democracy: Intercontinental Hotel Frankfurt, F. R. of Germany 28th-29th November, 1968* (Hannover: Buchdruckwerkstätten Hannover GmbH, 1968).

<sup>277</sup> 'Voice Editorial: Welcome Ford Workers', *Voice of Ford Workers: A Socialist Voice for Peace and Prosperity*, May 1964, p. 1.

<sup>278</sup> *Reports of the Workers' Control Conference/nth National Conference on Workers' Control, 1964-1968*, passim.

TGWU.<sup>279</sup> These prominent figures on the left of the Labour Party led two of the largest unions in the country, representing the majority of Ford workers. Both men also played prominent, if not entirely consistent, roles in disputes at the firm, as we shall see.

The IWC drew criticism from some on the left for falling too far under the influence of Jones and Scanlon. Chris Pallis, a leading member of Solidarity, went further to subject the politics of workers' control to a more general critique. Pallis traced the history of this term's use, drawing out its connections to the Bolsheviks' chequered legacy on industrial democracy. In doing so, he highlighted a distinction between the narrow meaning of the term *control* and *management*, which encompassed a wider range of activities. Such a demand, he argued, tacitly left these unchallenged.<sup>280</sup> Whatever the IWC's shortcomings, it demonstrated that the state integration of the unions was perceived as a threat from a range of viewpoints linked to Ford's workforce from leaders of the two main unions to rank-and-file militants and far-left activists.

That year Solidarity published a first-hand account of the events of May and June 1968 in France. This recounted how stewards from the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), the Communist union federation, dispersed crowds after a one-day general strike on 13 May. This aimed to prevent members from fraternising with students and others who had planned an open public discussion that day. CGT material was reproduced that depicted the rest of the far left as

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<sup>279</sup> The first pamphlet issued by the IWC was Hugh Scanlon, *The Way Forward for Workers' Control*, Pamphlet Series, 1 (Nottingham: Institute for Workers' Control, 1968).

<sup>280</sup> Published pseudonymously as Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks & Workers' Control, 1917 to 1921: The State and Counter-Revolution* (London: Solidarity, 1970), pp. i–ii. While Brinton was theoretically influenced by Cornelius Castoriadis the historical analysis was more original. For Castoriadis on management see, for instance, material republished in Castoriadis, II, p. 50.

'pseudo-revolutionaries' working in the 'service of the bourgeoisie'.<sup>281</sup> This implied that the party had done everything possible to isolate car factory occupations from wider social revolt, while redirecting workers towards purely economic demands. Despite Solidarity's marginality, the group developed an incisive account of the Communist Party's current activities, as well as a more general historical critique of Leninism, which was disseminated among Ford workers alongside factory reports.

### **Taking a Leaf out of Ford's Book, 1969 to 1970**

Tensions within the politics of workers' control came out at Ford the following year. That January *Socialist Worker* published critical remarks by a number of Ford shop stewards about how their workmates pursued grading claims. Instead, they argued in favour of demanding workers' control of job evaluation: 'Workers will accept the decisions by other workers—their own elected representatives.'<sup>282</sup> This highlighted conceptual ambiguities elided in the use of the term *workers control*, suggesting to some its political irrelevance in this context

'Leapfrogging claims', such as those over grading at Ford, were increasingly ascribed 'causal primacy' in the cost-push theories of inflation favoured by broadly Keynesian policy makers in the 1970s.<sup>283</sup> Yet, such tactics represented the only effective shop-floor strategy available to maintain wage levels, in the face of company and government policies. That a revolutionary newspaper gave left-wing stewards a platform to discourage the practice was remarkable to say the least.

Gambino later derided this position as the result of a misplaced ideological

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<sup>281</sup> *Paris: May 1968*, Solidarity Pamphlet, 30 (Bromley, Kent: Solidarity, 1968), p. 6.

<sup>282</sup> Jim Lamborn, 'Fords Wait for Vital Pay Talks', *Socialist Worker* (London, 18 January 1969), p. 4.

<sup>283</sup> John H. Goldthorpe, 'The Current Inflation: Towards a Sociological Account', in *The Political Economy of Inflation*, ed. by Fred Hirsch and John H. Goldthorpe (London: Martin Robertson, 1978), pp. 186–214 (p. 189).

commitment to workers control, a point made even more explicitly in the translation published by Red Notes.<sup>284</sup>

In fact, the shop-floor strategy proved so effective that the company agreed to fresh pay negotiations within one year of signing to a two-year pay deal. On 11 February the FNJNC met to discuss the company's proposals for a new package deal, which included penalty clauses. With officials representing just over half the unions in attendance, the union side voted to accept the offer by just two votes. Crucially, however, the two main unions, together representing more than seventy per cent of the workforce, did not back the deal. Representatives of both the TGWU and AEF, who could still be outvoted by officials from the other unions, abstained.<sup>285</sup> Nevertheless, the Labour government set out to rationalise industrial relations policies modelled on this system.

It took more than a week for management to fully inform the workforce of the details of the new agreement, issuing an 'Employee Information Sheet' on 20 February. The new terms included a holiday bonus worth twenty-five pounds and guaranteed lay-off pay, both of which could be withdrawn as a penalty for industrial action.<sup>286</sup> An unofficial strike shut down the Halewood transmission plant the next day, a Friday, pre-empting shop stewards' plans to call out the entire Merseyside workforce the following week. By Monday the strike had closed down the entire Halewood estate and two smaller plants in Basildon and Southampton, where tractors and vans were manufactured. Less widespread action only caused

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<sup>284</sup> Fn. 22 in Gambino, 'Ford britannica', p. 159; Fn. 23 in Gambino, *Workers' Struggle*, p. Notes 2.

<sup>285</sup> Beynon, *Working for Ford*.

<sup>286</sup> Reproduced in the second edition of Beynon, *Working for Ford*, pp. 248–49.

partial disruption in Dagenham, initially, before the AEF and then the TGWU made the strike official later that week.<sup>287</sup>

In response, Ford's lawyers successfully applied to the High Court for an interim injunction, restraining the two unions from supporting the strike until a hearing scheduled for Monday 3 March.<sup>288</sup> The company then applied for five further injunctions at this hearing. These included one 'to restrict these Unions from attempting to vary a new package deal agreement, other than by negotiations through the National Joint Negotiating Committee'.<sup>289</sup> This would have effectively barred organisations that represented the vast majority of Ford's workforce from taking action without the support of unions with a much lower mandate.

Since the new pay contract still remained unsigned, Ford's lawyers had to argue that other documents constituted a binding agreement. These included a notice issued by the union side of the FNJNC, announcing the 11 February deal. By this logic, no means should have been available to Ford workers to lawfully contest the decisions of this unrepresentative body. Such a situation would have effectively bound them to the terms of a new agreement they had not yet seen. Before the close of the case, the bench expressed the view that employment agreements still remained unenforceable. This prompted company's lawyers to withdraw their claim.<sup>290</sup> Ultimately, this was a favourable outcome for trade unions and their members. That the government's model employer took such legal action, however,

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<sup>287</sup> John Elliott, 'Ford's Pay Deal Hit by Official AEF Strike', *Financial Times* (London, 26 February 1969), p. 1; John Elliott, 'Union's Call out Over 50% of Ford Motor Manual Workers', *Financial Times* (London, 27 February 1969), p. 1.

<sup>288</sup> 'Law Report 4 March, Queen's Bench Division: Are Ford Agreements Legally Binding?', *The Times* (London, 5 March 1969), p. 16.

<sup>289</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 13/3553, Untitled memo beginning 'Fords issued a High Court Writ', [n.d.].

<sup>290</sup> 'Law Report 5 March, Queen's Bench Division: Ford Seek Revolution in Industrial Relations, Union Counsel Says', *The Times* (London, 6 March 1969), p. 7; 'Law Report 6 March, Queen's Bench Division, Collective Agreements Not Enforceable in Law', *The Times* (London, 7 March 1969), p. 8.

indicated the expanding gulf between a social-democratic administration and workers willing to take industrial direct action to defend their own interests.

Three weeks into the strike, Harold Wilson conferred with Barbara Castle and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Roy Jenkins in the Prime Minister's office at the House of Commons. While Wilson considered the policy implications of renegotiating a new productivity deal, without penalty clauses, Jenkins's voiced opposition to any outcome that could 'clearly be seen as a victory for the unions'. More significantly, Castle took personal credit for having 'worked out a formula which the management would be putting to the unions later that evening'. This included a twenty-five pound holiday bonus, ten pounds of which would be 'at risk for workers who participated in unconstitutional action'.<sup>291</sup> A senior minister drafted the details of the Ford contract.

The following day union leaders accepted this proposal at a meeting in the Ministry of Labour, the two champions of workers' control Jones and Scanlon among them. Mass meetings then took place at all but one of the company's plants. While 'many strong reservations were voiced about the peace formula',<sup>292</sup> specifically the penalty clauses, the majority of workers voted to accept the deal, however reluctantly. By then, four weeks of strike action had caused the loss of an estimated £40,000,000 worth of production, half of which was for export. Disruption to the supply of components made in Britain had also severely affected Ford's production across Europe, with lay-offs in Belgium and the loss of output in Germany.

A week later Barbara Castle suggested to Harold Wilson and Roy Jenkins 'that, following the Ford strike, she thought the psychological atmosphere was right for a short bill to implement some of the provisions in the White Paper'. The Prime

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<sup>291</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 13/3553, 'Confidential: Note of a Meeting in the House of Commons', 17 March 1969.

<sup>292</sup> John Elliott, 'Almost Complete Return at Ford Likely To-Day', *Financial Times* (London, 8 March 1969), p. 1.

Minister went further to speculate about legislation ‘taking a leaf out of Ford’s book’. Why not tackle unofficial action through conditional holiday and lay-off payment schemes? Even for Castle, imposing the Ford model so exactly across the whole of British industry seemed impractical, as she spelled out to him in writing.<sup>293</sup>

In any case, *In Place of Strife* quickly ran into difficulties. When the policy came before the Labour Party’s National Executive later that month, Home Secretary James Callaghan joined ‘union rebels’ in voting down the proposals, without resigning his cabinet position. The Prime Minister and First Secretary were soon forced to shelve their planned industrial relations legislation.<sup>294</sup>

While setting the scene for this government failure and tarnishing the left-wing credentials of union leaders, the strike also received external support from new sources. Later that year Ken Weller, a prominent member of Solidarity and former shop steward at Ford, explained what form this took in an article for the group’s eponymous journal. Weller described ‘the unconditional help given to the strikers by large number of students, in the field of typing, duplicating, and producing a steady stream of posters and leaflets’.<sup>295</sup> External militants intervened in this dispute to an extent and in ways not seen previously.

The origins of much of this activity went back almost a year earlier, when social unrest was still erupting across the Channel. At the time a socialist theatre company CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre) called a meeting at the Unity Theatre in north London, a venue linked to the Communist Party. The organisers

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<sup>293</sup> London, National Archives, PREM13/2725, Untitled Confidential note from Department of Employment and Productivity to the Prime Minister’s Office, 25 March 1969; ‘Prime Minister’s Personal Minute no. 25/69’, 3 April 1969; ‘Prime Minister’s Personal Minute M32/6’, 14 April 1969; and Untitled Minute from the Minister of Employment and Productivity to the Prime Minister, 23 April.

<sup>294</sup> Richard Evans, ‘Callaghan Stands Firm’, *Financial Times* (London, 28 March 1969), p. 28.

<sup>295</sup> Under the pseudonym Mark Fore, ‘Ford: The Settlement’, *Solidarity: For Workers’ Power*, 5.9 (1969), 1–6.

set out to bridge ‘a gap between the left and cultural work’, responding to both ‘a dissatisfaction with the straight left [...] and a dissatisfaction with the counter cultural’ as the painter John Hoyland explained afterwards.<sup>296</sup> A number of related projects emerged from this event.

One of these was a screen-printing project the Poster Workshop, which went on to provide a particularly practical form of support during the Ford strike. Launched the previous summer, this collective operated out of a dingy basement in north London. Indicating a major source of inspiration, the premises were flyposted with artwork by the Atelier populaire, the Parisian agitprop collective responsible for many of the most iconic images from May 1968. A website recently created by former Poster-Workshop members specifically mentioned the Ford strike, while explaining how they worked with other groups:

We could if necessary respond very rapidly to a request for posters. The most extreme case was probably for a strike at Fords, Dagenham. The vote to strike was taken at a meeting at 10 p.m., and the shop stewards rang through to the landline of the local pub, where we were waiting for their call. (No mobile telephones in those days.) They needed posters to put out around the factory in time for the 6 a.m. morning shift. We worked through the night designing, printing, and finally drying the posters with a hairdryer, before driving out to Dagenham before dawn, in time to hand them over to the shop stewards.<sup>297</sup>

Before their defeat in the early 1960s, the Dagenham shop stewards would have printed their own material, but no longer had the means to do so. Instead of turning

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<sup>296</sup> Cited in Catherine Itzin, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain since 1968* (London: Methuen, 1980), p. 39.

<sup>297</sup> ‘The Poster Workshop: About Us’, *The Poster Workshop*, 2018 <<http://www.posterworkshop.co.uk/aboutus.html>> [accessed 19 September 2018] (*sic*); see also Sam Lord and others, *Poster Workshop, 1968-71* (London: Four Corners, 2018).

to the unions for support, they now accepted assistance from a source outside the mainstream of the labour movement.

During the strike the AgitProp Street Players, a theatre troupe that emerged from the same meeting, wrote and performed a new piece in Dagenham *Stuff your Penal up your Bonus*. Acknowledging the aesthetic limitations of this intervention, some of those involved later singled out the title as a creative highlight. That said, they also recalled the act of turning up to perform in spite of inclement weather as a simple gesture of solidarity that was well received. Chris Rawlence, a founding member of Agitprop, also drew a contrast with the sort of reception more conventional interventions from the far left might have expected at an industrial dispute: 'They're going to take advantage of us and stuff a leaflet down our throats or get us to join something.'<sup>298</sup> At the very least, this alternative approach overcame such justifiable scepticism.

Shortly after the dispute Agitprop Information began to publish a newsletter *Red Notes* from a squat on Gower Street in Bloomsbury, London's main university district. With the Hot Autumn erupting in the meantime, the adoption of the same title as the Italian workerist journal *Quaderni rossi* cannot have been a mere coincidence. An article in the first issue discussed how to achieve greater political unity between workers and students with reference to a single case study:

One very practical means of permanent assistance has been initiated by the Ford workers at Dagenham. Faced by increasing need to know exactly what their bosses are up to they contacted Agitprop and asked us to find some students who were willing to work as a research group.'<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Itzin, p. 43.

<sup>299</sup> 'Student Worker Unity', *Red Notes* (London, December 1969), p. 4. The subsequent publisher of the same name was not directly related.

Whatever came of this, which remains unclear, the claim that Ford workers initiated this exchange indicated that interest in developing such a relationship went both ways.

Dagenham Convenor Sid Harraway certainly suggested as much when he addressed the next Conference of the Institute for Workers Control. 'I would also pay tribute', he told his fellow delegates, 'to the students who participated in picket activities and the like'.<sup>300</sup> Harraway then recounted an incident when extra pickets helped prevent a delivery of fuel, claiming that this helped keep the temperatures inside the plant below a minimum-operating threshold. Whatever bearing such incidents had on the dispute's outcome, or not, that he felt the need to make such a public statement at this forum was revealing in itself. Clearly, Harraway believed it to be worthwhile to maintain a good relationship with these elements at the time.

Apart from the well-established critique of *Solidarity*, such activity generally subordinated itself to the rank-and-file trade-union leaders, it seems. During the strike itself, however, the newsletter of *The Black Ram* signaled a possible shift to come: 'If in the Ford strike the union repeats its 1967 sellout of the workers,' one article warned, Ford 'Langley and other such plants will be in the same position as Dodge – workers against both management and unions.'<sup>301</sup> The same issue reported the activities of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, where just such a break with the major automobile union was taking place.

*The Black Ram's* coverage of Ford was fleeting. However, its editor Selma James bridged a gap between C. L. R. James, her husband whose politics influenced subsequent autonomist tendencies, and the emergence of autonomist feminism, which she helped develop. As well as questioning the role of the unions and not just officials, *The Black Ram* also drew attention to the racial composition of the

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<sup>300</sup> Sid Harraway, 'Fords and After', *Bulletin of the Institute for Worker Control*, 1.3, 43–45 (p. 44).

<sup>301</sup> 'Editorial: Master Ford's Unwipped Slaves', *The Black Ram* ([n.p], 15 March 1969), pp. 1–2 (p. 2).

company's workforce for the first time. According to the article, an increasingly racialised division of labour at Ford saw the expansion of a Black workforce that was more distant from the union than their white counterparts. As also occurred more generally in Britain, racism became a more visible issue and Black workers played a more prominent part at Ford over the course of the next decade.

The following year saw another external intervention on Merseyside, which emerged from broadly the same milieu as those of 1969. During the 1970 Ford pay negotiations, which did not result in industrial action, activists on Merseyside began work on a new local paper *Big Flame*. Over the course of the following decade, this name would become closely connected with unrest at the firm, first as a publishing collective and then as a political organisation. One of the founders Martin Yarnit explained its origins in interview.<sup>302</sup>

Before *Big Flame*, Yarnit helped to organise a sit-in occupation at the University of Keele in 1968 and completed a masters at Reading. He then returned to Wallasey, just across the Mersey from Liverpool at some point in the summer or autumn of 1969:

I met up with a couple of people at that stage. One of them was a Trotskyist, a local Birkenhead working-class guy who had got involved in Trotskyist politics, and the other was a very different person. He came from an upper-class background, had been in Paris in 1968, and had been involved in the Poster Workshop. The three of us sat down together in a pub in Birkenhead one night and we said: 'We need to do something. We need to bring poster art and newspapers to the working-class movement in Liverpool.'

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<sup>302</sup> What follows in this section draws upon my previous work in Eoin O'Ceanaigh, 'Big Flame: An Attempt to Ignite Revolutionary Class Struggle in Britain 1970-1984' (unpublished Master's Dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2013).

We looked around, and we found other people with similar ideas.<sup>303</sup>

As the underground and alternative press burgeoned, *Big Flame* began as a Merseyside newspaper, broadly located on the far left but without any party affiliations. It aimed to address a working-class readership in a city with a rich history of social struggle.

Inspiration for the title came from 'The Big Flame', a television play written by Jim Allen and directed by Ken Loach. BBC One first broadcast this programme earlier that year as an episode in the *Wednesday Play* drama series. Shot in black and white, this was a work of social realism, a genre more widely adopted by directors of the British New Wave. The plot depicted a fictional wildcat strike on the Liverpool docks at a time when the sector was, in fact, undergoing a combination of labour unrest, technological change and state intervention. At one point in the story the protagonist Jack Regan, a docker and shop steward, addressed one of his mates:

When them early morning risers were spouting socialism, I was too busy down in the ship fighting for peanuts—not anymore. Now I want to see the big flame Danny. I want to see one big solid mass of us that will point the finger at those raiders and say: 'You failed in your management of society, so pack your bags, think yourself lucky and go'.<sup>304</sup>

The television play concluded with an open ending, suggesting a nondeterministic view of history that emphasised the role of human agency. With the possibility of general strike looming in the background, the forces of the state prepared to suppress industrial action on the docks. Those who appropriated the name *Big Flame* afterwards shared the playwright and director's commitment to a

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<sup>303</sup> Martin Yarnit, Interview, 2016.

<sup>304</sup> Ken Loach, 'The Big Flame', *The Wednesday Play* (BBC One, 1969) <<http://www.youtube.com/movie/the-big-flame>> [accessed 26 May 2013].

revolutionary politics that emphasised the role of direct action by the broad mass of workers in achieving social change.

Within a year of the initial broadcast of this drama, the first issue of the paper *Big Flame* came out on 26 February 1970. It carried the strap-line 'merseyside's rank and file paper' and was priced at sixpence. A front-page article set the tone, announcing that: 'If you live on Merseyside and spend your life being pushed around this is the paper for you'.<sup>305</sup> Another headline informed readers that 'Fords & Parity' would be covered in the next issue.<sup>306</sup> From the outset, the intention to provide a shop-floor perspective of industrial disputes was made clear. This included a focus on the local automobile sector in general and the Ford Halewood plant in particular.

When the promised piece came out in the next issue, it praised the trade-union strategy in the recent contract negotiations, which resulted in a flat-rate pay rise of four pound per week. True, this fell well short of the original demand for an increase of ten pounds. Shop stewards had also recommended rejecting the offer, but only workers at a plant in Swansea and some sections at Halewood held out for more by taking unofficial action. Yet, *Big Flame* still framed this as a success, reporting it as a 'well organised campaign designed to inform and involve all workers and shop stewards'.<sup>307</sup> The new make-up of the FNJNC was seen as an important improvement. After last year's debacle, representation on the committee had finally been extended from union officials to also include convenors. The voting system also began to reflect the number of members different unions had at the firm, as well as the geographic distribution of the workforce.

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<sup>305</sup> 'Big Flame...', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper* (Liverpool, 26 February 1970), 1 edition, p. 1 (*sic*).

<sup>306</sup> 'Next Issue: Fords & Parity', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper*, 26 February 1970, 1 edition, p. 1 (*sic*).

<sup>307</sup> 'Facts about Ford the Press Did Not Tell: Ford Parity Campaign', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper* (Liverpool, April 1970), p. 4.

In the following month's issue one of the Halewood convenors Eddie Roberts welcomed the arrival of the paper, writing that 'we hope [...] *Big Flame* is here to stay'. Although he singled out the publishers' success at so far avoiding the sectarian divisions of the left, he went on to warn against any 'external body trying to dictate the affairs of the organised workers in the factories'.<sup>308</sup> To begin with *Big Flame* aligned itself closely with the more militant elements among the Halewood shop stewards, including senior figures such as Roberts.

The collective that published the paper managed to avoid such sectarian splits, which characterised so much of far-left politics, long enough to begin bringing out the paper. As well as individuals with no party affiliations, the paper involved members of various organisations: the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), International Socialist (IS) and the Communist Federation of Britain (CFB).<sup>309</sup> Predictably enough, fractures soon appeared in this coalition, however. A report in the paper of a readers' meeting at the Swan Hotel on 15 March openly explained that those in attendance were divided between a number who believed *Big Flame* should go on as it is and others who felt that it should go beyond reporting to political analysis and the taking of principled stances'.<sup>310</sup> Years later a *Big Flame* pamphlet would describe how 'under pressure for clear politics the working alliance came apart at the seams, despite still selling thousands of copies'.<sup>311</sup> Within a month of Labour's general election defeat, the seventh and final issue came out that July, just five months after its launch.

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<sup>308</sup> Eddie Roberts, 'Big Flame's Success Depends on You', *Big Flame* (Liverpool, April 1970), pp. 1 & 4.

<sup>309</sup> archivearchie (*sic*), 'The Beginning: Episodes in Big Flame History No. 1', *Big Flame 1970-84*.  
<<http://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/2009/04/29/episodes-in-big-flame-history-no1/>> (25 May 2013).

<sup>310</sup> 'Meeting' *Big Flame: merseyside's rank and file newspaper*, 3 (April 1970), p. 3.

<sup>311</sup> *Big Flame, An Introduction to Big Flame: Our Politics, History, Structures and Publications* (Liverpool: Big Flame, [1978]).

Nothing appears to have filtered through from Italy's Hot Autumn, which continued to smoulder at the time. That said, traces of the politics of working-class autonomy could be detected in this first incarnation of the *Big Flame* paper though. One issue featured a front-page photograph of a worker tearing up his union card during a strike at Pilkington. This dispute, a major focus of the paper, saw workers at the glass manufactures, which supplied Ford, attempt to set up a breakaway union.<sup>312</sup> The next page also featured a favourable review of the Solidarity pamphlet *GMWU-Scab Union* and displayed artwork from the Poster Workshop.<sup>313</sup>

### Chapter Conclusion

As the post-war settlement fell into crisis in the late 1960s British state policy became increasingly enmeshed with industrial relations at the Ford Motor Company (Limited). The sewing machinists' strike persuaded Barbara Castle of the need to legislate against unofficial action, while the 1969 Ford national pay strike set the scene for this policy's demise. The divisions this caused then contributed to the party's general election defeat in June 1970. They also caused the system of trade-union mediation to come under increasing strain. Exemplifying this, Jones and Scanlon opposed their allies in government on the principle of the matter, while alienating union members by compromising over the issue in practice at Ford. Meanwhile, *Solidarity* continued to give the clearest expression of the politics of working-class autonomy, being joined briefly by *The Black Ram*. A broader current of open Marxism also emerged from 1968, which inspired by events in

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<<http://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/intro78-all.pdf>> (24 april 2013).

<sup>312</sup> 'St. Helens Strike Busters Move In', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper* (Liverpool, May 1970), p. 1.

<sup>313</sup> 'Poster Workshop', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper* (Liverpool, May 1970), p. 2; 'Read *GMWU—Scab Union*', *Big Flame: Merseyside's Rank and File Paper* (Liverpool, May 1970), p. 2. For a visual history of the Atelier populaire, see *Beauty Is in the Street: A Visual Record of the May '68 Paris Uprising*, ed. by Johan Kugelberg and Vermès Philippe (London: Four Corners, 2011).

France and Italy adopted new cultural and political practices and began to intervene at Ford.

### 3. Tories Must not Win Where Labour Failed, 1970 to 1974<sup>314</sup>

During Edward Heath's first year as Prime Minister, Ford workers went on strike over pay in the longest dispute in the British subsidiary's history. They stayed out for nine weeks from 29 January until 5 April 1971. During this dispute the Industrial Relations Bill passed through Parliament, adding to the political significance of the strike. While presented as yet another response to the Donovan Commission, this legislation threatened harsher legal sanctions for unofficial action than the previous proposals of the former Labour government. Coinciding with a public-sector pay dispute in the Post Office, the nine-week strike represented the first challenge by private-sector workers to the new Conservative administration's incomes policy. The 'second Battle of Britain', as the Director General of the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) dubbed these events at the time, pitted two groups of workers against the British state and corporate capital as represented by the third largest US multinational company.<sup>315</sup> When union officials and management arranged a settlement behind the backs of the workers, many remained hostile to the deal, unofficial action continuing afterwards at plants in Swansea and Halewood. The wider dynamics of the period played out at Ford with industrial unrest at the firm an integral part of this process.

This chapter situates the strike and the disputes that followed at Ford under the Heath administration in relation to the development of a politics of working-class autonomy in Britain. Groups like Solidarity and Big Flame only had a marginal position in relation to the company's workforce, as well as the wider working-class struggle of the period. Yet, this should not belie the relevance of their

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<sup>314</sup> This slogan appeared on a placard at a demonstration against the Industrial Relations Bill filmed in *Fighting the Bill* (Platform Films & Video, 1970).

<sup>315</sup> John Elliott, "'Stand Firm against High Wage Claims,' CBI Chief Urges", *Financial Times* (London, 23 January 1971), p. 1; 'Fortune 500: A Database of 50 Years of Fortune's List of America's Largest Corporations', *Fortune* <[http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500\\_archive/full/1971/](http://archive.fortune.com/magazines/fortune/fortune500_archive/full/1971/)> [accessed 12 September 2018].

analysis to what took place. In the aftermath of the 1971 strike, a particularly acute situation developed at the centre of organised labour at Ford, reflecting a wider crisis of political representation both in industry and society at large. This left the shop stewards increasingly cut off from workers' struggles on the shop floor, which increasingly erupted into violence. As we shall see, such unrest involved the use of tactics advocated beforehand by Big Flame and Solidarity. The two groups also aimed to provide car workers with the means to communicate unmediated by the trade unions, both at the institutional level of full-time officials and even in terms of the formal leadership of the shop stewards. Such an approach clearly chimed with a mood of militancy among significant sections of workers inside the factory, which both groups documented in detail. This provided a perspective from below not recorded in other sources.

The current chapter begins with an account of the 1971 national pay strike at Ford. An examination of the relationship between labour unrest at the company and the development of the politics of working-class autonomy in Britain during this period then follows. The final main section returns to industrial conflict inside the firm to focus on the period between this dispute and the Heath administration's defeat in the first of two general elections in 1974.

### **The Second Battle of Britain, 1970 to 1971**

In November 1970 with the Ford pay contract up for renegotiation the following spring, *Socialist Worker's* Sabby Sagall co-wrote a piece with Tom Langan on the situation at the company. Langan was an Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW) shop steward, who worked at Dagenham. This article linked the demand at Ford for 'parity' with the highest pay rates in the automobile sector to a transition in the rest of the British automobile sector away from piecework and towards measured day work. Such a payment system, which went back to the early

days at Ford, increasingly became a model for the British automobile industry as a whole. Not only did this highlight income inequality between car workers, it also raised the question of whether workers or employers would benefit from the resolution of this disparity. Ford's role as a model employer also continued to extend beyond the sector across British industry in general as it still provided a template for public policy. Limiting cost-push pressure on inflation by controlling wage increases remained a key public policy tool, whichever of the two main parties was in government.

In the article Langan cautioned his workmates against having unrealistic expectations of trade-union officials. 'The "left" leaders cannot be relied upon to give a consistent lead', he warned. 'They will act militantly only to the extent that the rank and file takes a strong initiative.'<sup>316</sup> The role Hugh Scanlon, AUEW President, and Jack Jones, Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) General Secretary, had played in negotiating a deal that introduced penalty clauses to Ford's 1969 contract already gave grounds for such scepticism. While the extent of these concessions had been more limited than what would follow, they highlighted the hazard of relying on Jones and Scanlon's commitment to shop-floor democracy.

Later that month Moss Evans, TGWU National Secretary (Automotive) and Chairman of the union side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC), formally submitted a wage claim. This included a demand for parity 'with the best standard secured in the British motor industry'. To clarify what he meant by this, Evans drew a comparison with pay rates at specific other firms: 'your employees', he told management negotiators, 'are paid around 6s. to 8s. an hour less' than at Chrysler and British Leyland.<sup>317</sup> A detailed technical analysis of Ford's commercial position, produced by the TGWU research department in collaboration

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<sup>316</sup> Langan [*sic*] Tom and Sabby Sagall, 'New Pay Battle Looms at Ford', *Socialist Worker* (London, 7 November 1970), p. 5.

<sup>317</sup> Moss Evans, *The Ford Wage Claim* (London: Transport & General Workers Union, 1970), pp. 5 & 14.

with Ruskin College's trade union research unit, supported the case that the company could afford to meet this demand.

The *Financial Times* labour editor called the claim 'comprehensive, well researched and, on the face of it, impressive'.<sup>318</sup> Such an approach clearly met with approval from some quarters, but it received a cooler reception from others. According to a Big Flame pamphlet, the document reduced the dispute to 'a squabble between two sets of accountants over the heads of the workers involved'.<sup>319</sup> Doing so overlooked how pay and profit related to day-to-day disputes between workforce and management over production issues, such as manning levels and the speed of the assembly line.

As negotiations proceeded, management called into question the figures from the unions' wage claim, claiming labour costs at Ford were actually the highest in the British automobile industry.<sup>320</sup> The data used to make this case aggregated staff pay, including senior management salaries, with the wages of the hourly paid workforce. The figures also concealed any relationship between overall wages and varying rates of overtime and shift-work patterns at different firms, as well as differences in productivity and the impact of lay offs across the sector.

Two days after the claim was formally submitted, the annual Ford Shop Stewards Conference took place in Coventry. Delegates passed a resolution agreeing to support the demand for parity and to oppose the Industrial Relations Bill with a one-day strike on 8 December 1970.<sup>321</sup> This coincided with a national demonstration to oppose the legislation. The campaign was organised by the Liaison Committee for the Defence of the Trade Unions (LCDTU), a Communist led

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<sup>318</sup> John Elliott, 'Car Workers' Pay: Looking to Ford to Step on the Brake', *Financial Times* (London, 7 January 1971), p. 14.

<sup>319</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, p. 27.

<sup>320</sup> 'No Suicide Pact Warning', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees* (Dagenham, 30 November 1970), section 1.

<sup>321</sup> Peter Cartwright, 'Ford Stewards Call for Walk Out on December 8', *Financial Times* (London, 30 November 1970), p. 38.

initiative initially established to oppose the previous Labour government's trade union policies. As well as linking the claim for parity to opposition to the government's industrial strategy, this resolution signalled the militant mood of rank-and-file organised labour at the firm, with over eighty per cent of the two hundred delegates voting in favour of industrial action.

Negotiations officially opened when the full FNJNC met at the company's Regent Street offices in London on Friday 29 January 1971. At the meeting Bob Ramsey, labour relations director, dismissed the wage claim as an invitation 'to commit commercial suicide', instead offering an increase of two pound per week. This left 'a gap of £12-£16 to be closed' between the firm's proposal and the demand for parity.<sup>322</sup> When convenors became aware of the situation during an adjournment in the talks, they called a strike for the following Monday. Before the meeting had even ended, however, shop-floor workers seized the initiative. Spontaneous walkouts occurred at Halewood, Swansea and the Dagenham Knock Down Plant (where vehicles were prepared as kits for reassembly abroad). Crucially, the strike began with shop-floor workers taking unofficial action spontaneously without following a lead from union representatives at any level.

This sequence of events had much wider implications because the Industrial Relations Bill, which aimed to prevent just such 'unconstitutional' action, was not yet enacted. Had it been in force already, Ford stewards could have faced legal liability 'despite the fact that they were democratically elected—and despite the fact that there was a clear revulsion against the offer made by management'—as Jack Jones explained on the record at the time.<sup>323</sup> With support growing for the campaign to 'Kill the Bill', the dispute came to represent the threat legislation

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<sup>322</sup> Michael Hand, 'Ford Faces All-Out Strike as Union Rejects £2 Offer', *Financial Times* (London, 30 January 1971), p. 1.

<sup>323</sup> David Wilson, 'Bill Would Make Ford Convenors Liable', *Financial Times* (London, 8 February 1971), p. 1.

posed to shop-floor worker's ability to take unofficial action in future and the defiance with which this challenge met.

Despite all the unions involved making the dispute official within a week, supporters of the government's attempt to shift the balance of forces at work also sought to make political capital of the strike. Ford management claimed that 'convenors took the law into their own hands and brought everyone out on unconstitutional strike'.<sup>324</sup> This overlooked how shop-floor workers walked out from plants across the country three days before union representatives had even called for industrial action to begin.

The weekend after the strike became official the company took out full-page newspaper advertisements, listing '6 facts' that supposedly undermined the case for parity. Having written directly to individual workers in previous disputes, Management explained the need to use this means of communication, 'in view of the cessation of postal services', with reference to the other major strike then taking place.<sup>325</sup> Such an approach clearly aimed to sway public opinion too.

Meanwhile, the FNJNC next met at the company's request on 19 February. At these talks Ramsey offered to raise the minimum pay increase from £2 to £2.50 a week. This was to be paid for without any further funds being made available, however, by abandoning a proposed service increment. Unsurprisingly, union negotiators rejected a 'final offer' that would have left most of their members worse off than management's original proposal. Later that day Ford convenors voted unanimously to continue the strike.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>324</sup> Ford Motor Company Ltd., 'To Ford Employees Now on Strike: 5 More Facts You Ought to Know', *Daily Mirror* (London, 17 February 1971), p. 15.

<sup>325</sup> 'To Ford Employees Now on Strike: 6 Facts You Ought to Know', *Daily Mirror* (London, 9 February 1971), p. 6.

<sup>326</sup> Roy Rogers, 'Exports Warning as Fords Pay Talks Break Down', *Financial Times* (London, 20 February 1971), p. 1; 'Fords: No Increase in Pay Offer', *Morning Star* (London, 20 February 1971), p. 1.

Negotiations resumed again five weeks into the strike, when management requested that the FNJNC meet again on 2 March. Within two days talks broke down, when the union side rejected another offer to increase wages by at least three pound and twenty pence per week. While Ramsey warned that this marked 'the start of the decline of Ford in Britain', Moss Evans countered that the proposal was 'well below what the company can afford to pay and what our members expect'.<sup>327</sup> The FNJNC would not meet again until after an intervention by Jones and Scanlon to broker a backroom deal.

Despite criticisms of the unions' failure to encourage wider participation, the support of Ford workers for the strike remained solid.<sup>328</sup> Mass meetings at plants across the country consistently voted in favour of industrial action on thirteen separate occasions. However during the dispute, the BBC broadcast an interview with two women who claimed to speak for the wives of most Ford workers in voicing opposition to their husbands' actions. Clearly, the loss of pay during industrial action disrupted the ability of households to meet their everyday living costs—something such women would generally have been keenly aware of given their role within the household. In response, a group of 'Ford wives' from Dagenham, Tom Langan's spouse among them, invited journalists to a meeting at which they issued a strong rebuttal.<sup>329</sup> Seven years later Ford workers' partners would organise even more systematically, beginning before the outbreak of industrial action, to rebuff a similar attempt to disrupt another nine-week, as discussed below in Chapter Six.

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<sup>327</sup> Mick Costello, 'Ford Workers Slam Bosses as Talks Fail', *Morning Star* (London, 5 March 1971), p. 1; Roy Rogers, 'Ford Is Facing "a Long Strike"', *Financial Times* (London, 5 March 1971), p. 1.

<sup>328</sup> Such criticism was not limited to the likes of Big Flame and Solidarity. See also Mathews, p. 116. Mathews's 'Strike Diary' in the appendix, pp. 205-08, includes a chronology of all the mass meetings at Ford.

<sup>329</sup> 'Anti-Strike? Not on Your Life', *Morning Star* (London, 25 February 1971), p. 1; Mathews, pp. 128-29.

The recurrence of such situations called attention to the relationship between waged labour and unpaid housework, revealing how industrial production is integrally linked to the reproduction of workers in the home. During the strike the capacity of workers to withdraw their labour was sustained in part by their entitlement to claim social security payments for their dependants, if not themselves. Such claims transferred £450,000 of the cost of lost earnings from the households affected to the state.<sup>330</sup>

The significance of this situation was not lost on the government at the time. Before the end of the dispute the Secretary of State for Social Services Sir Keith Joseph introduced new legislation to reduce the eligibility of workers to make such claims during industrial action. On 29 March he made a statement in the House of Commons to announce publication of a new Social Security Bill. Making the case for new legislation, Joseph specifically told MPs that ‘the supplementary benefit payable to workers at Ford now engaged in a trade dispute would have been cut to something like two-thirds’, indicating the strike’s relevance to such a change. In response to questions from fellow MPs, he also described the measure as having ‘distinct political overtones’, a remarkably candid remark.<sup>331</sup>

Then on 23 February William Batty wrote a letter to *The Times*, warning that ‘my Company last week decided to recommend against an expenditure of almost £30 million for a new expansion’ in Britain. Batty explicitly blamed the decision against investment in the British subsidiary on industrial action. He went on to assert that Ford ‘contributed more to the British balance of payments than virtually

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<sup>330</sup> Claimants Union, *Claimants Handbook for Strikers* ([London]: Claimants Union, 1972), p. 1.

<sup>331</sup> House of Commons, *House of Commons Debate (Hansard)*, Fifth Series, DCCCXIV colls 1155-56.

any other organization', emphasising the impact of the corporation's investment decisions on the wider British economy.<sup>332</sup>

Sid Harraway responded on behalf of the shop stewards, pointing out that the decision to locate the new plant at Bordeaux in France had been announced weeks before industrial action began. Exposing discrepancies in Batty's account of the sequence of events discredited the company's purported rationale for this decision. Harraway also accused Batty of inconsistency in simultaneously representing the labour of Ford workers in Britain as both a highly productive source of exports and a poor return on investment.<sup>333</sup>

Six weeks into the strike Henry Ford II, the founder's grandson and now chairman of the corporation, told a Tokyo press conference 'we will be thinking very hard and long about any new investment (in Britain)', reiterating the threats made by the British subsidiary's managing director.<sup>334</sup> 'There is nothing wrong with Ford of Britain, but with the country', he declared provocatively on his arrival at London's Heathrow airport the following week, adding that 'we cannot recommend any new investment in a country so dogged with labour problems'.<sup>335</sup> Senior ministers then held a 'luncheon to join with Mr. Heath in reassuring Mr. Ford that the government are acting resolutely to improve industrial relations in Britain'.<sup>336</sup>

The American business leader received a less warm reception from pickets who greeted him on Whitehall with placards bearing hostile slogans, including 'Go

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<sup>332</sup> W. B. Batty, 'Letters to the Editor: Effect of Strike Action on Production at Ford', *The Times* (London, 23 February 1971), p. 13.

<sup>333</sup> Sid Harraway, 'Letters to the Editor: Effect of Strikes on Ford Production: Shop Stewards' Reply', *The Times* (London, 24 February 1971), p. 13.

<sup>334</sup> 'Henry Ford: "Hard Look" at Future U.K. Expansion', *Financial Times* (London, 8 March 1971), p. 29.

<sup>335</sup> 'Henry Ford Blames UK', *Observer* (London, 14 March 1971), p. 1.

<sup>336</sup> 'Mr Heath and Mr Henry Ford to Discuss Future of the Company's Operations', *The Times* (London, 11 March 1971), p. 2.

Home Yanks and Bring Back Parity at Ford'.<sup>337</sup> Jack Jones took a more conciliatory approach at the time, asking the industrialist for a meeting to resolve the dispute, a request which was snubbed. Ford did, however, tone down his rhetoric in a statement after the lunch, accepting that management shared some responsibility for the state of labour relations and expressing a commitment to ongoing production in Britain.

Following his visit, organised labour from the USA also became publically embroiled in the dispute. On 23 March United Automobile Workers (UAW) President Leonard Woodcock attended the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF) World Auto Council Conference in London. Delegates from nineteen countries passed a resolution at this event, pledging to back the strike financially. Woodcock's own statement gave a clear impression that whatever practical support was required would be forthcoming: 'The federation will have to raise financial assistance and do other things necessary, if Fords show evidence of breaking that strike and attempting to break the unions involved.'<sup>338</sup> He then joined his fellow delegates in a display of international unity on the Dagenham picket line the next day, a gesture reinforcing the previous message of support.<sup>339</sup>

Apart from this public performance of solidarity, however, the US union boss played another role behind the scenes with a much greater bearing on the strikes' outcome. On the same day as the IMF conference, Woodcock joined Jones and Scanlon for talks with the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Employment. Jones later recalled this as a cordial occasion: 'Heath greeted us in a most friendly fashion and gave us a courteous hearing.'<sup>340</sup> Following this meeting

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<sup>337</sup> Mick Costello, 'Ford Refuses to Meet Jack Jones', *Morning Star* (London, 16 March 1971), p. 1.

<sup>338</sup> Mick Costello, 'World Unions Pledge Cash to Ford Strike', *Morning Star* (London, 24 March 1971), p. 1.

<sup>339</sup> 'Visitors Please Ford Pickets', *Morning Star* (London, 25 March 1971), p. 3.

<sup>340</sup> Jack Jones, *Union Man: The Autobiography of Jack Jones* (London: Collins, 1986), p. 234.

*The Financial Times* reported that ‘Mr. Carr was particularly interested in Mr. Woodcock’s account of the development of long-term agreements in the U.S.’<sup>341</sup> Officially, the Ford dispute was off the agenda of these talks, which only covered industrial policy in general terms. That discussion focused of the merits of longer US-style pay contracts became a matter of public record though. Afterwards just such a deal occurred at Ford, following the direct intervention of the two British union officials in attendance.

To bring this outcome about, the government and TUC leaders helped management approach Jones and Scanlon directly despite ministers’ reluctance to become visibly involved in the dispute. *The Times* then reported ‘speculation’ that the two officials would intervene in the strike.<sup>342</sup> When a group of Liverpool stewards confronted Jones about these rumours on the same morning the article came out, his denial was emphatic: ‘I’m not involved [...] It’s up to you lads—you’re running the strike.’<sup>343</sup> Yet, within a day he had accepted an invitation to hold secret talks with senior company executives.

Bypassing the company’s own procedural channels, Ford of Europe Chairman Stanley Gillen and Bob Ramsey then made a new offer to Jones and Scanlon. While this fell short of the demand for parity, the company improved upon the previous £2 offer in exchange for the introduction of a new penalty clause and an agreement to put the decision to the workforce in a secret ballot. This included a minimum initial pay rise of £3.62 a week and two further incremental increases over the term of a two-year contract. The union leaders then presented the deal to a ‘hurriedly called’ meeting of the union side of the FNJNC the following night. Sid Harraway, as reported in the *Financial Times*, initially described the outcome as ‘a victory for the

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<sup>341</sup> Michael Hand, ‘Demand for Curbs on International Groups’, *Financial Times* (London, 24 March 1971), p. 1.

<sup>342</sup> Paul Routledge, ‘Ford Unions to Hold Critical Meeting’, *The Times* (London, 25 March 1971), p. 19.

<sup>343</sup> Mathews, p. 143.

broad parity movement' despite some reservations. While the tone of the piece was generally upbeat about the deal, it reported dissent from a number of the committee's recently appointed lay members who had apparently abstained.<sup>344</sup>

The *Morning Star* offered a less sanguine assessment of what was on offer. One anonymous steward compared accepting the penalty clause and the introduction of secret ballots to 'accepting the Tory anti-union Bill even before it had been railroaded through parliament'.<sup>345</sup> The same piece suggested that most convenors on the FNJNC had opposed the settlement. Clearly, the deal encountered strong hostility from the outset.

According to Mathews, a source close to the shop stewards at Ford, two convenors voted against the deal, two others were not even notified of the meeting beforehand and two officials also opposed the offer. To ensure the outcome of the meeting, he described Jones and Scanlon using strong-arm tactics at odds with their image as champions of workers' control within the unions. Moreover, some members of the FNJNC later claimed to have only been informed about the imposition of a secret ballot after they had already agreed to recommend acceptance of the deal to the workforce.<sup>346</sup>

While still opposing legislative change, Jones and Scanlon's approach set out to show 'restraint in the use of strike action to maintain a public reputation for constitutionalism', according to labour historian Alistair Reid.<sup>347</sup> Perhaps so, but the tactics used to achieve this end undermined the credibility of the two union leaders and the Ford shop stewards organisation, which had backed their election in a campaign for trade-union democracy.

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<sup>344</sup> Michael Hand, 'Ford Ballot on 16% Two-Year Package Pay Offer', *Financial Times* (London, 1 April 1971), p. 1.

<sup>345</sup> Mick Costello, 'Fords Offer 2-Year Deal', *Morning Star* (London, 1 April 1971), p. 1 (p. 2).

<sup>346</sup> Mathews, pp. 149–52.

<sup>347</sup> Reid, p. 301.

The subsequent ballot, 'a shabby affair' according to Body Plant Convenor Jock Macrae, took place on Monday 5 April. This reportedly involved numerous irregularities. Some workers claimed to have received multiple voting slips, while others reported not receiving one at all. Aside from such alleged irregularities, another issue also had a crucial bearing on the outcome of this process. During mass meetings at plants in Halewood and Swansea the weekend beforehand, workers had decided to stay out on strike by a show of hands. The *Morning Star* quoted one Merseyside steward's view of the best way forward: 'We came out on a show of hands and we'll go in on a show of hands.'<sup>348</sup> This presented a major dilemma for Ford workers who opposed the deal, whether to accept the process and vote 'no' or to instead abstain from the secret ballot.

The failure of shop stewards to agree a common strategy proved decisive. The final result came in at 16,471 in favour of the agreement compared to only 6546 against, but only about half of the workforce even voted. Afterwards Sid Harraway offered a muted response: 'I will be back at work. The shop stewards accept the decision of the ballot although I personally voted against accepting the offer.'<sup>349</sup> While distancing himself from the outcome of a dubious decision making process, this senior convenor made clear his opposition to any further industrial action. Not everyone on the shop floor was prepared to give up the fight so quickly.

Work resumed in Dagenham soon after the vote, while Moss Evans had to visit Swansea in person to persuade the workforce there to do the same. This facility produced rear axels for Ford's entire British output of cars, representing a potential bottleneck in the supply chain, as did the Halewood Transmission Plant where all gearbox production took place. Initially at least, the strike carried on

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<sup>348</sup> 'Low Ford Poll Accepts Deal', *Morning Star* (London, 3 April 1971), pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>349</sup> 'Two Ford Plants Vote to Stay Out', *Morning Star* (London, 5 April 1971), p. 1; although there are some small discrepancies with the results reported in 'Ford: How They Voted', *Financial Times* (London, 3 April 1971), p. 15 these still broadly support this analysis.

unofficially after the ballot at these two locations. The *Morning Star* anticipated that this could lead to wider company lay-offs the following week, indicating the potential for such unrest to quickly cause disruption. However, union leaders persuaded both plants to resume production before this happened.<sup>350</sup> Just as it began with spontaneous walkouts, the longest strike at Ford in Britain ended with unofficial action, which occurred even without the involvement of union leaders even within the hierarchy of the shop stewards organisation.

### **None of Us Were Crying When Carr's House Was Bombed**

A dramatic sign of how Britain became increasingly polarised under Edward Heath's Conservative government came in the form of a spate of bomb and arson attacks on establishment targets. These included a device detonated inside the St James's Square offices of the Department of Employment and Productivity, which went off the day after a national demonstration against the Industrial Relations Bill. Two more devices exploded at the home of Minister of Employment Robert Carr on 12 January, the date of another 'Kill the Bill' demo. A series of communiqués signed 'The Angry Brigade' claimed responsibility for both attacks and a string of others.<sup>351</sup>

During the Ford dispute another bomb went off at the firm's accounts office at Gants Hill in the early hours of 19 March, the morning after a one-day strike by more than a million engineering workers. An Angry Brigade *communiqué* claimed responsibility for the explosion, ending on an unambiguous if somewhat melodramatic note: 'WE BELIEVE IN THE AUTONOMOUS WORKING CLASS. WE ARE PART OF IT. AND WE ARE READY TO GIVE OUR LIVES FOR OUR

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<sup>350</sup> 'All but Two Ford Plants Start Work', *Morning Star* (London, 6 April 1971), p. 3.

<sup>351</sup> Stuart Christie, 'Chronology: "The Angry Decade" January 1966 to December 1975', in *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain's First Urban Guerilla Group*, by Gordon Carr, PM Press edition (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), pp. 194–236 (pp. 218–24).

LIBERATION.<sup>352</sup> The influence of the Situationist International on the Angry Brigade has been widely noted, since a detective in the case made the link. From the late 1950s onwards this small group of European radicals fused avant-garde art practices with anti-authoritarian Marxist theory to develop a provocative and irreverent style of intervention. Whatever tensions there were between workers' self-organisation and tactics involving the clandestine use of explosives, the language used in this *communiqué* indicated the Angry Brigade's alignment with the politics of working-class autonomy.

Following the strike, another explosion rocked the home of Ford Managing Director William Batty, with a further blast also damaging a transformer on the Dagenham estate the day after the former shop steward John Dillon was reinstated. Glossing over industrial unrest at Halewood, *Ford News* filled the front page with a report describing the attack on Batty's house with a two-pound gelignite bomb. This recounted how a woman claimed responsibility on behalf of the Angry Brigade in a call to the Press Association. Meanwhile, another communiqué opened: 'JOHN DILLON'S IN; WE WON | BATTY AND HIS TRANSFORMER'S OUT; WE WON AGAIN', attempting to draw a link between industrial action and such interventions.<sup>353</sup>

John Barker, who was arrested two months later and then convicted on a conspiracy charge in relation to the Angry Brigade campaign, discussed these events with me in interview. While denying any personal role in these specific actions, Barker previously described the police as having 'framed a guilty man' in his case.<sup>354</sup> After recounting his personal trajectory through the Claimants Unions

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<sup>352</sup> 'Communiqué 7' reproduced in Gordon Carr, *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain's First Urban Guerilla Group*, repr. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), p. 241.

<sup>353</sup> 'Bomb Blast Outrage', *Ford Bulletin: For Ford Employees* (Essex, 25 June 1971), p. 1; 'Communiqué 10', reproduced in Carr, p. 245.

<sup>354</sup> John Barker, 'Postscript: Anarchy in the UK: The Angry Brigade by Tom Vague, AK Press. [A Review]', in *The Angry Brigade: A History of Britain's First Urban Guerilla Group*, by Gordon Carr (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), pp. 180–88 (p. 180).

and Solidarity, having torn up his Cambridge final exam papers in protest at 'education as a system of exclusion', he turned to the intervention at Ford:

The group I was convicted of being a part of actually, in this strike, put a bomb in the generator at Ford's Dagenham. You know, what effect this had, one way or another... It probably had no effect, whatsoever, but the attitude from the people involved—as I understand it—was that it was more a... sort of cheering up... or a highlighting of Ford. I imagine quite a lot of activists in Ford were really pissed off about it. I think some weren't, some were. And as I am sure you know, car workers in this period—it was car workers and miners—seemed to be the most organised and powerful trade unionists.<sup>355</sup>

However dramatic their campaign, relating the Angry Brigade to industrial unrest at Ford runs the risk of overstating the significance of this aspect of the history, either demonising or romanticising those involved in the process. Barker reflected back on his role at the time with ambivalence, expressing self-respect for his willingness to take a stand tempered with some self-criticism for the decisions of his early twenties. Instead of celebrating or condemning the actions of the past, however, he emphasised the significance that automobile workers had from such a revolutionary perspective at the time.

He also stressed the need to contextualise the broader social unrest of this period in relation to the government's particularly hostile approach towards the working class. Barker summed this up with reference to Heath's depiction as 'Selsdon Man', an allusion to the 'proto-neoliberal programme' of the Conservative Party's 1970 general election manifesto. He also suggested the need to 'look at it in a kind of reverse way', situating what occurred in the early 1970s in relation to what followed. The US abandonment of fixed exchange rates and the introduction of internment without trial in Ireland that August, the month of his own arrest,

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<sup>355</sup> John Barker, Interview, 2017.

signalled a wider offensive by international capital and the British state, alike. However, such 'indicators don't become actually effective until the IMF' imposed terms on Britain for the bail out between 1975 and 1976.<sup>356</sup>

The 1971 strike also saw the first intervention at Ford Halewood by a new political organisation, which emerged from the recently defunct *Big Flame* newspaper collective and readopted the same name. This drew together militants around the country from the same left-libertarian milieu as the Stoke Newington Eight, the defendants in the main trial following the Angry Brigade campaign. Members of the new group and those on trial shared a common background in the Claimants Union, the Women's Liberation Movement and as student radicals at Cambridge and Essex, in particular. Citing 'political differences', *Big Flame's* solidarity with the defendants fell short of support for the actions for which they stood trial. A successful prosecution was seen as a setback for the wider movement though, and the group held back from expressing outrage: 'none of us were crying when Carr's house was bombed'. Political difference centred on a question of tactics. 'Until the actions can be integrated into the process of working class struggle', such interventions were seen as provoking 'repression without a mass reaction'.<sup>357</sup>

Instead, *Big Flame* took a less spectacular approach. Shortly before the next Ford contract negotiations began, the group started distributing leaflets outside the company's Halewood plants. These were written in collaboration with contacts already established among the workforce through the former newspaper. The

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<sup>356</sup> Ibid. This echoes points he raised previously in a magazine article, republished as Barker, 'Postscript: Anarchy in the UK: The Angry Brigade by Tom Vague, AK Press. [A Review]', p. 182. In this piece he also discussed the influence of Italian workerism, while observing how little material was available in English before his arrest in 1971.

<sup>357</sup> 'Political Violence', *Big Flame: Merseysides Socialist Newspaper* (Liverpool, June 1972), p. 4.

earliest example of such a leaflet still available was addressed to those Halewood workers that remained strike after the dispute officially ended.

This opened by encouraging them to continue with their action. The text also emphasised the strategic importance of the Merseyside plant for Ford's internal supply chain: 'Fords can't sell cars without gearboxes, and we're not making them, are we?' The authors went on to ask rhetorically 'why Jones & Scanlon did the dirty', before arguing that 'it's not the individuals, it's the whole set-up that goes wrong'. Rather than a specific issue with the personalities involved, the problem reflected the wider social function of trade-union bureaucracy. The leaflet went on to set out Big Flame's position: 'We don't claim to be yet another political leadership because we believe that the working class can and must provide its own leadership inside the factories and the community.'<sup>358</sup> Such an approach put into practice the sort of break with Leninist vanguardist politics advocated by Mario Tronti, relegating the political organisation or party to a tactical role and seeking to locate strategic leadership within the working class.

While Tronti's most relevant writings had yet to be translated into English, a collection of materials from and about the Italian workers' movement provided the content of the first Big Flame pamphlet that July.<sup>359</sup> This gave a glimpse of the context, development and aftermath of Italy's Hot Autumn (l'autunno caldo) in 1969, when a series of industrial pay-contract negotiations erupted into violent social unrest. The text described the emergence of new organisational forms, such as the worker-student base committees at the Fiat Mirafiori plant in Turin. It also discussed the development of shop-floor tactics, such as 'the snake', an unruly procession that spread wildcat strikes throughout the factory. Trade-union mediation came under criticism, and examples were provided of unmediated forms

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<sup>358</sup> Big Flame, 'Halewood Carries on the Fight', 1971

<<http://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/>> [accessed 17 September 2018].

<sup>359</sup> Big Flame, *Italy: New Tactics and Organisation* (Wallasey, Cheshire: Big Flame, 1971).

of shop-floor struggle from physical confrontations with management to acts of sabotage. Without going into much theoretical depth, this introduced an English readership to Italian workerism (*operaismo*) as a political practice.

Most of this piece was republished again later that year in *Radical America*, a journal linked to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a prominent organisation in the US anti-Vietnam War movement.<sup>360</sup> *Solidarity* featured a review of the pamphlet that, while not entirely uncritical, welcomed the first-hand accounts of workers' self-organisation from Italy. Despite Big Flame's contribution to the circulation of these politics, it remains unclear how widely the pamphlet was circulated between members of Ford's workforce, or what impression it left with those who read it. All the same, it is striking that after 1971 workers at the firm increasingly adopted tactics advocated in the text. While such practices cannot necessarily be traced back to this source, the politics articulated in it were clearly more in synch with the attitudes of militant shop-floor workers than the labour movement's official leadership.

When I interviewed Martin Yarnit, one of the *Big Flame* newspaper's three founders, he described his memories of this period as 'incredibly fragmented'. Indeed, he felt unable to give any account of *Big Flame's* transition from a broadly left-wing rank-and-file newspaper to one 'of the same name with a much smaller group of people clustered around it who had apparently similar politics'. He went on, however, to explain clearly how their rejection of the Leninist vanguardist politics set them apart from most of their contemporaries on the radical left in Britain:

We didn't believe in a *coup d'état* by a party seizing power and we didn't believe in [...] a party seizing the influence and the support of the working class. We thought we had to build from the bottom, within the class.

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<sup>360</sup> 'Italy: New Tactics & Organization', *Radical America*, 5.5 (Sep.-Oct.), 3–38.

Alongside feminist theory from the women's liberation movement, which women members brought to the group, he explained how the Italian workers' movement provided a major theoretical influence. This came about 'partly through Ed Emery and his documentation about the struggles of the Fiat workers at Turin, but more directly [...] via Marcello Dall'Aglio'. Dall'Aglio was a member of Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle), an organisation on the Italian extra-parliamentary left, who had moved to Liverpool by then. According to Yarnit, Big Flame's approach went beyond 'just bringing the ideas of *Operaismo* and Autonomism' to an English audience: 'it was also a way of looking at the world strategically' he explained.<sup>361</sup> As well as addressing some of the limitations of human memory, documentary sources support his recollections.

An article published by Big Flame in 1972 recorded how the group re-emerged as a political organisation from an initial intervention to leaflet Ford Halewood during the 1971 strike. A Ford group then became one of five 'base groups', subsequently known as 'commissions', which were set up to coordinate the new organisation's activities. While acknowledging that most of those who initially participated in the group did not work for Ford, the authors claimed that 'workers who come, whether or not they think of themselves as "Big Flamers", have final control', an indication of how they put their critique of Leninism into practice.<sup>362</sup> Such an approach favoured organising with others rather than recruiting them into a party with pretensions to constituting the intellectual or political vanguard of the class struggle. This suggested that Big Flame's uncontested marginality in terms of membership numbers belied the relevance of the group's perspective to the wider situation.

Another early political intervention by Big Flame took place on the Tower Hill housing estate in Kirkby, which provided overspill accommodation for

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<sup>361</sup> Yarnit.

<sup>362</sup> '35hrs: The Struggle in Ford', *Big Flame Bulletin*, 3 (1972), 21-24.

Liverpool. Despite this residential neighbourhood's location on the opposite side of the city from Halewood, what happened there had a closer relationship to events at Ford than might be expected. Tenants began to organise on the estate within the context of widespread opposition to rent increases, due to the withdrawal of subsidies for council houses in 1972 under the Housing Finance Act. While a national campaign saw tenants across the country join in a partial rent strike, refusing to make the full payments in line with the increase, a local action group in Tower Hill went further, calling a full rent and rate strike. This turned a housing estate on Merseyside into one of the two main hubs of resistance to the legislation, alongside Clay Cross—a Derbyshire mining town where Labour councilors ultimately faced bankruptcy for refusing to implement the policy.

Prior to the start of this campaign, Big Flame advocated a militant stance in opposition to the Conservative government's regressive housing policy. When the group relaunched a newspaper in July 1972, a front-page article in the first issue argued that 'tenants will have to organise and fight', months before the beginning of the rent strike that autumn. The same piece also argued that success would require mass participation rather than 'a committee of a few "dedicated people"'.<sup>363</sup> That December, shortly after the rent strike began, a number of women in Tower Hill invited female members of Big Flame to help them set up a women's group there.

Two years later the first issue of the *Big Flame Journal* featured a report of this intervention, published after the fourteen-month rent strike ended in defeat for the tenants. This credited the action group, in which International Socialist (IS) members played a prominent role, for how well they ran the campaign, however unsuccessful the outcome. While the authors reflected frankly on the relatively minor part they had played in these events, they also made criticisms of the rent

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<sup>363</sup> "'Sewage, Rats and Rent Rises"', *Big Flame: Merseysides Socialist Newspaper* (Liverpool, June 1972), p. 5.

strike leadership. Treating childcare as an individual responsibility not relevant to the campaign, they argued, had been a significant mistake. This left marginalised mothers on the estate, who were more readily available to defend it during the day than others who worked elsewhere. Likewise, the failure to gain industrial support for the rent strike lay, for them, with the decision to liaise with the Shop Stewards Committees instead of leafleting individual workers at the factory gates.<sup>364</sup>

Brian Ashton, a former line worker in the Halewood PTA Plant and a member of the International Socialists (IS) at the time, described to me more recently how the action group's unsuccessful industrial strategy played out at Ford. After the courts began to impose prison sentences on participants in the rent strike, housing activist and Tower Hill resident Tony Boyle approached Ashton at a picket outside Walton Gaol. At the time Boyle asked him to help establish contact with the unions at Ford, so as to discuss implementing a decision previously reached at a branch meeting to take industrial action in such circumstances.

Ashton agreed to assist Boyle and another activist to covertly enter the plant. During a shift change the two followed him in at a discreet distance and he led them to the union's offices. They then met the available senior shop stewards, but not the convenor who was attending an FNJNC meeting at the time. Later that day, a personnel manager confronted Ashton about having helped these unauthorised visitors access company premises, a sackable offence he denied. This encounter left the shop-floor militant in no doubt as to who had exposed him:

That was my PhD. That is when any illusion I had in the union, or in the shop stewards went [...] Because I was of the left, I had to be done in and they used that opportunity. But, the problem was—in order to get me sacked, because I'd denied it—the only people who could prove I'd done it were Tony Boyle, the other fellow [from Tower Hill], and

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<sup>364</sup> 'We Won't Pay: Women's Struggle on Tower Hill', *Big Flame Journal*, 1, 1974, 2-7.

the four fucking union guys. [...] It'd blow the place up, so nothing happened other than that.<sup>365</sup>

The rent striker's strategy ended in failure. Relying on shop stewards to lead industrial workers out on strike in support of a social struggle based outside the factory ultimately did nothing to prevent their defeat.

While earlier precedents existed for this sort of social rather than industrial unrest, such as the 1915 Glasgow rent strike, the Marxist and feminist theory that informed Big Flame's politics reframed the political significance of such struggles. Mario Tronti's social factory thesis highlighted the welfare state's role in the most recent phase of capitalist development, which was then sliding into crisis, stabilising social relations to maintain the supply of labour and sustain growth. Tronti represented this as a moment of real subsumption, a term Marx used to distinguish how capital had historically subsumed prior forms of labour formally through the wage before taking direct control of the labour process. The social factory thesis suggested that the boundaries between the sphere of industrial production and that of social reproduction were becoming increasingly indistinct.

Feminists from the same political tendency as Tronti, such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, then engaged critically with this analysis. Their work underscored the role of women's unwaged housework in the social reproduction of labour power.<sup>366</sup> To some extent, these perspectives complemented each other. Yet, a tension also remained between viewing the social factory as a relatively recent phase of capitalist development and the feminist examination of the relationship between social reproduction and capitalist development in greater historical depth.

As well as drawing a link between Ford Halewood and such wider social struggles, Brian Ashton also described how the situation changed following the

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<sup>365</sup> Ashton.

<sup>366</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa, *Potere femminile esoversione sociale: con <<Il posto della donna>> di Selma James*, Interventi, 14, 3rd edn (Padova: Marsilio, 1974); Dalla Costa and James.

departure of former convenor Eddie Roberts, who was generally well regarded by militant workers. Afterwards a clique opposed to shop-floor militancy gained key leadership positions among the shop stewards. Opponents dubbed them the 'Heyton Mafia' after Harold Wilson's nearby constituency, the Labour Party branch to which many of them belonged.

The documentary record supports the view that the shop stewards' organisation at Ford became increasingly distant from the firm's shop-floor workers, particularly after Jones and Scanlon's intervention to end the 1971 strike. To some extent, this reflected a specific shift in the company's labour relations strategy, as management experimented with integrating shop stewards into formal industrial-relations apparatus. More generally, it showed how a growing structural crisis in the post-war settlement precipitated a breakdown in the systems of union mediation it relied upon. This gave greater relevance to Big Flame and Solidarity, groups which viewed trade unionism more critically than more orthodox tendencies. In both cases, this went beyond the more conventional distinction between the unofficial leadership of the shop stewards and the bureaucratic role of full-time officials, taking a more critical view of trade unionism in general. The two groups also rejected the Leninist shibboleth of an external vanguardist party bringing revolutionary class-consciousness to the workers, who purportedly needed such leadership to transcend the limitations of 'trade-union consciousness'. Whatever their differences, both organisations shared a focus on industrial unrest outside the ambit of the union, which proved prescient as labour relations continued to deteriorate.

One such incident 'blew up' in May 1972 in the Dagenham Knock Down plant when management attempted to redeploy twenty-five workers from this part of the estate to the PTA plant. When they refused to leave their workplace, they were threatened with suspension and, so, decided to occupy the canteen. A report in

*Solidarity* described how a confrontation that initially involved just a few workers quickly escalated, as management tried to find anyone willing to accept a transfer: 'This continued for two days, until there were several hundred men occupying the canteen. By this time they were spilling out into the works and refusing to move.'<sup>367</sup> Not only did management eventually back down, but eight workers, who originally accepted the move, were reinstated in their previous positions afterwards.

While recognising this incident as 'relatively insignificant', the author of the article saw lessons to be learned from how participants organised collectively, their decision to remain inside the factory and their disregard for procedures. The absence of any 'tightly-knit group of militants taking charge of events (albeit with the best of intentions)' also met with their approval.<sup>368</sup> This was a reference to what *Solidarity* saw as a tendency for even the most militant shop stewards to discourage other workers from actively organising industrial action for themselves.

Against this backdrop of unrest unmediated by trade unionism even at the level of the shop stewards organisation, another round of pay negotiations began. In anticipation of the current contract coming to an end in February 1973, convenors and national officials drew up a new set of demands that autumn. According to Big Flame, the vaguely worded formula arrived at by the trade union side of the FNJNC reflected the quality of leadership that could be expected from this quarter in the coming campaign:

What does a "shorter" working week, or a "substantial" pay rise or an "improved" pension scheme mean? Nothing—except letting the negotiators off the hook. The only good sign is that the convenors have said they don't want another two year contract. Just as well. This one has been a disaster for the workers.

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<sup>367</sup> 'Fords: News from the Shop Floor', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 6.10 (no date), 13–15 (p. 14).

<sup>368</sup> 'Fords: News from the Shop Floor', p. 14.

Instead, the group proposed an alternative claim of fifteen-pound pay for a thirty-five-hour week and entitlement to full lay-off pay. Big Flame also identified 'increasing need for a national rank and file organisation, independent of officials and convenors'.<sup>369</sup> In a first step towards this goal, members distributed an open letter, which they had drafted with sympathetic Ford workers, outside plants in Dagenham, Leamington and Swansea, as well as Halewood.

### **Incensed Workers Went on the Rampage, 1971 to 1974**

In the aftermath of the 1971 strike Ford management followed the by now familiar routine of exploiting the end of a large national dispute as an opportunity to assert authority on the shop floor. This time events came to a head in Halewood at the beginning of June. Following the dispute managers cut manning levels on a particular team in the Paint Shop from eight to five. Then when the team was cut again to four men, shop steward John Dillon called an informal meeting, reportedly in an effort to defuse the situation, but the remaining workers walked out. The company appeared to back down at first with work resuming by the end of the week.<sup>370</sup>

The firm sacked Dillon the following Monday, however, for the by now familiar offence of holding an unauthorised meeting on company premises. This led 1300 of his workmates to walk out immediately with 1500 others on the night shift joining them the following day. Despite previous assurances that Dillon would not be victimised, managers decided to take this step at a secret weekend meeting in the Adelphi hotel, which was then leaked to shop stewards. Labour Relations Director Bob Ramsey chaired proceedings, indicating a strategic decision by senior

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<sup>369</sup> 'Fraud Contract', *Big Flame: Merseysides Socialist Newspaper* (Liverpool, September 1972), p. 5.

<sup>370</sup> 'Stalemate at Halewood', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 6.10, 1-2a.

management to attack shop stewards on Merseyside as previously happened in Dagenham.<sup>371</sup>

In response, industrial action spread to the Transmission Plant and threatened wider disruption to production, leading management to enter into negotiations with trade-union officials. On 22 June the company reinstated Dillon, but redeployed him to another section without his shop-steward credentials. A headline in the *Morning Star* declared 'Workers Hail Victory' in celebration of this outcome.<sup>372</sup> By contrast, Big Flame saw this as only a partial victory, since a 'position of strength was frittered away through negotiations and the union compromised' by agreeing to the conditions imposed on Dillon's return to work. This marked a turning point, it was argued, in the 'self-confidence, militancy and popularity of the Halewood stewards', which went into decline afterwards.<sup>373</sup>

The company then announced planned redeployments at Halewood on 29 December 1972, the last working day of the year. The timing of this announcement was no coincidence. The Heath administration introduced a new incomes policy the previous month, while Ford's current contract was due to expire on 1 March the following year. This gave significant political weight to the outcome of upcoming pay negotiations, which threatened to pose a major challenge to phase two of the government's pay freeze. With these changes in manning levels, management aimed to assert authority over a section of the workforce that had played a leading role in the most recent pay struggles at the firm. Instead, widespread unrest broke out at Ford Halewood.

The company's attempt to implement the policy began the following Tuesday with seven men taken off a section of the trim line, increasing the intensity of

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<sup>371</sup> Jim Arnison, 'Bosses' Secret Talk Led to Sack', *Morning Star* (London, 16 June 1971), p. 3.

<sup>372</sup> Jim Arnison, 'Ford Stoppage Ends, Workers Hail Victory', *Morning Star* (London, 22 June 1971), p. 3.

<sup>373</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, pp. 8–9.

labour for those left behind. In response to what effectively amounted to a speed up from their point of view, the remaining workers simply allowed cars to roll off the line unfinished. Intervention by convenors failed to resolve the situation, so managers ordered the workers to go home. Instead, they held a sit down protest inside the plant. That night another manning issue on the next shift in the Body plant provoked a separate sit-in, which led management to lay off a third group of workers.

The response of those who were laid-off invited international comparison in a Big Flame pamphlet: 'They quickly organised what the FIAT workers in Turin called a Snake'.<sup>374</sup> This description seems loaded with the possibility that the group's earlier account of such tactics influenced the practice of those who initiated this action. A mobile demonstration inside the plant closed down the press shop, a section identified by the authors as strategically important in terms of potential disruption to production in Dagenham and across Ford's European facilities.

The next day the dispute spread to the Engine plant. Then, on Friday the union held a mass meeting in Anfield Stadium. 'Amid shouts and boos, the motion was narrowly carried', but this result seemed skewed to some.<sup>375</sup> The entire PTA workforce participated in the vote, although the dispute only affected one of two shifts in that plant, while Body Plant workers involved in industrial action were given no say in the matter. With another round of pay negotiations on the horizon, this formed part of a wider pattern that saw senior stewards repeatedly try to defer worker's militancy until after the contract had expired. A commitment to 'constitutionalism', which seemed inconsistently tolerant of sharp practices towards union democracy, extended down from the national leadership to senior shop stewards at Ford.

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<sup>374</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, p. 16; Big Flame, *Italy*, p. 10.

<sup>375</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, p. 17.

Three days later the union side of the FNJNC rejected an initial company proposal to increase pay by £2.40 per week, hundreds of Ford stewards voted in favour of an all-out strike unless management improved on this offer. Later that day more shop stewards from other automobile firms, as well as the public sector, joined them to back a LCDTU campaign against the Conservatives' pay freeze. Meanwhile, 'bound by the constraints of the Government's Phase Two pay policy', management reportedly 'refused to go beyond the £2.40 offer—the maximum permitted under the £1 plus 4 per cent limit'.<sup>376</sup> A pay dispute at Ford looked set to occupy centre stage in the industrial politics of Britain yet again.

In practice, this proved not to be the case with events unfolding in a convoluted fashion. Having spent months damping down shop-floor militancy, convenors went through the motions of calling for an all-out strike. A union-backed 'Guerrilla Campaign' of unofficial action then followed at plants in both Dagenham and Halewood, which combined one-day strikes, overtime bans and a work-to-rule. Over two months passed before a deal was eventually reached that was little different from what was originally on offer.<sup>377</sup>

Illustrating this shift in relations between shop stewards and management, a front-page article in *Ford News* carried the headline 'Not Them and Us—Just Us' that summer. This piece reported effusively on a company sporting event: 'When Halewood shop stewards took on Ford management in a charity football match last Friday, it was one long happy giggle.'<sup>378</sup> We should, perhaps, avoid too credulous a reading of any report in the firm's newspaper, since such an internal publication served as a means of corporate communication to help manage employee relations. The author acknowledged as much in an attempt at humour, stressing the report's

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<sup>376</sup> Noel Howell, 'Ford Shop Stewards Support Call for All-Out Strike', *Financial Times* (London, 19 February 1973), p. 1.

<sup>377</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, pp. 29–42.

<sup>378</sup> 'Not Them and Us—Just Us', *Ford News: For Ford Employees* (Essex, 22 June 1973), p. 1.

impartiality on this occasion. Intentionally or not, this suggested such a disinterested approach was atypical. No doubt, even-handedness came more easily given the relative insignificance of the outcome of this particular confrontation, a conveniently level two-all draw all the same. However superficial such a story might seem, it showed management's desire to project a conciliatory image of labour relations, and the willingness of enough Halewood shop stewards to play along with them to field a team.

Such sportsmanlike gestures stood at odds with the deteriorating working relations on the factory floor, as recorded in another Big Flame leaflet that summer. This gave a very different view of working relations at the firm to the piece in *Ford News*. The piece began by subverting the company's current recruitment campaign slogan, responding to it with a rhetorical question: 'Take a Ford job!... and what have you got?'<sup>379</sup> Plundered from the same advertisement, an image depicting the Fordist archetype of a white suburban family accompanied the text with a comic-strip thought bubble emerging from the father's head. This listed the negative financial, emotional and physiological effects of working for the firm, before concluding: 'It's a Fraud!' The leaflet went on to describe the firm's difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, the struggle over layoffs and the ongoing impact of work on life beyond the factory, before ending with an article from the *Financial Times*. This reported Ford's agreement to pay Argentinian hospitals one million dollars after left-wing guerrillas shot two managers in an attempted kidnapping. No commentary accompanied this excerpt, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions.

Later that summer serious unrest broke out again at Ford Dagenham, during a heat wave at the end of August 1973. With temperatures particularly hot in one

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<sup>379</sup> London, MayDay Rooms, East London Big Flame Collection, Big Flame, 'Take a Ford Job!', [c. July 1973] <<http://www.eastlondonbigflame.org.uk/files/Take%20a%20Ford%20Job!%20mid:late1973.pdf>> [accessed 26 September 2018].

section of the paintshop, managers turned down a request to temporarily allow extra breaks. In response, the twenty-four sprayers who worked there withdrew their labour. Managers then attempted to lay off 2400 of their workmates in the Body Plant without pay.<sup>380</sup>

The timing of this decision just before midnight, when workers who had just come on shift would face difficulties finding transport home, provoked a volatile response. A local newspaper the *Barking & Dagenham Advertiser* published a sensationalist account of what happened next:

Hundreds of angry Ford workers staged a midnight “sit-in” rebellion after being told they would be laid off because of a strike. Management officials were trapped in their offices as rioting workers swept along the corridors smashing windows and breaking furniture. Two security guards, called in to restore order, were pushed down a flight of stairs as the incensed workers went on the rampage.<sup>381</sup>

Perhaps, this version of events should be taken with a pinch of salt, since the dramatic attack on the two security guards received no mention elsewhere.

The way in which management made light of events did not ring true either though. One company spokesman casually dismissed it all as just ‘a bit of skylarking’ with a nonchalance that defied credibility.<sup>382</sup> The incident was, after all, sufficiently serious to force the firm to concede full pay to the entire workforce for the whole shift. Such an understated response clearly aimed to avoid the situation escalating further.

The Communist *Morning Star*, which remained close to senior shop stewards in Dagenham, made no mention of this incident. Instead the paper reported on a

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<sup>380</sup> Peter Cartwright, ‘Talks Today on Midland Car Strikes’, *Financial Times* (London, 31 August 1973), p. 31.

<sup>381</sup> ‘Rebels Fight Lay-Off Threat: Ford Men in “Midnight Riot”’, *Barking & Dagenham Advertiser* (Dagenham, 7 September 1973), p. 1.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*

recent speech delivered by Henry Ford II in California.<sup>383</sup> In his talk, the corporation's chairman described the Dagenham River Plant as a 'cesspool', before claiming that the women working there had threatened strike action over plans to move them to a new facility. A strong rebuttal of these allegations forced an embarrassing denial out of the British subsidiary's management. Yet, attention focused on this war of words, instead of the more heated confrontation inside the factory, demonstrating how distant senior shop stewards were from the shop-floor unrest.<sup>384</sup> While Body-Plant Convenor Jock Macrae announced that future lay-offs would be resisted, the union leadership at Ford generally seemed to share management's inclination to play down these disturbances.

Such understatement stood in stark contrast to *Solidarity's* assessment of the situation. By this account, trouble started in the Body Plant when a 'West Indian' welder Winston Williams was dismissed for allegedly threatening to assault his foreman. A stoppage on Williams's section to demand his reinstatement then led management to announce lay-offs in both the Body and PTA plants the following week. The next day chaos broke out in both factories. Managers barricaded themselves into their offices; windows, vehicles and equipment were damaged; and 'protestors' confronted shop stewards who tried to calm them down. After an initial mass meeting at which two convenors 'Macrae and Harraway were booed and catcalled', the Shop Stewards Committee only regained control of the situation by persuading workers to leave the factory and instead picket official negotiations.<sup>385</sup> This reinforced *Solidarity's* view that this body no longer

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<sup>383</sup> Compare and contrast 'Henry Ford Has Gotta Say Sorry', *Morning Star* (London, 30 August 1973), p. 3; and Sid Harraway, 'Blabbermouth Ford Really Should Belt Up!', *Morning Star* (London, 4 September 1973), p. 4; with 'Walkout at Ford over Pay Guarantee', *Morning Star* (London, 1 September 1973), p. 1; and 'Ford Go Back', *Morning Star* (London, 3 September 1973), p. 3.

<sup>384</sup> 'River Plant JWC', *Ford News* (Dagenham, 14 September 1973), p. 1.

<sup>385</sup> M.F., 'Rumpus at Ford's', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 7.8, 5-8 (p. 5).

represented rank-and-file workers, irrespective of the militancy of individual shop stewards.

At another mass meeting in the PTA Plant that September, convenor Brian Elliott 'didn't mention the Winston William's sacking' and 'had to be pressurised from the floor [...] to publicise the P.T.A.'s demands relating to layoffs' to workers from the rest of the Ford Dagenham estate. All the same, the combination of an overtime ban with high labour turnover in the PTA restricted management's ability to lay off assembly-line workers. This section of the workforce tended to be particularly vulnerable to disruptions in production elsewhere in the supply chain, since final assembly required an available supply of all the different components needed to build a finished car. In the end, industrial action proved so effective that union full timers had to be brought in to persuade workers to resume production on 22 November. 'It was an angry meeting', according to a report republished by Red Notes, 'with bottles thrown at the Union officials – but the issue was lost... for the time being'.<sup>386</sup> Having tied Ford's workforce into a series of two-year deals—which imposed penalties without delivering parity—union officials undermined their members in the disputes that inevitably ensued over manning levels and layoffs as managers attempted to reassert their authority.

Big Flame offered a practical assessment of the increasingly polarised dynamics of the situation inside the firm's car plants:

A pattern is developing at Ford about what sort of issues can be won and the way you have to fight to win. Disputes which 'go through procedure' tend to end in compromise and defeat. But when Ford workers have taken the fight into their own hands they have been more likely to win.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> *The Little Red Blue Book: Fighting the Layoffs at Fords*, A Red Notes Pamphlet (London: Red Notes, 1978), p. 2. Ellipsis in the original.

<sup>387</sup> Big Flame Ford Group, p. 4.

Such findings were hardly surprising given the group's political perspective, although they also tallied with the situation on the ground.

Afterwards Big Flame circulated another document by a 'comrade in East London' providing a preliminary analysis of working-class struggle in Britain from *In Place of Strife* to the demise of the Heath administration. This suggested that the influence of the recent situation in Italy on the industrial politics in Britain went beyond its influence on their own perspective. Ford plants began to experience 'the "guerrilla strike" or "articulated strike" policies learnt by the unions from their Italian counterparts', who had become so adept at riding the tiger of industrial unrest after the Hot Autumn.<sup>388</sup> The author saw such techniques as allowing the union to maintain control over shop-floor unrest, while stifling its political potential. The lack of a major political challenge to phase two reflected a lack of preparation and organisation among the working class. The author counterposed the demoralisation caused by union strategy to growing anger and an increasingly sophisticated awareness of this situation among shop-floor workers, whatever political and organisational weaknesses remained.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

Much had changed since Heath came to power. The 1971 Ford national pay strike was one of the most politically charged industrial disputes to confront the new government. While Ford workers took this as an opportunity to challenge government industrial policy, officials brokered a deal that imposed secret ballots and penalty clauses before they became law. The failure of shop stewards to prevent this outcome further widened an existing gap between rank-and-file union representatives and the wider workforce. This breakdown in trade-union

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<sup>388</sup> London, MayDay Rooms, East London Big Flame Collection, [Anon.], 'The Current Crisis—Working Class Struggles and the State 1969-1974', [n.d.].

mediation at all levels led to ineffective pay claims, combined with growing and increasingly volatile shop-floor unrest over issues such as lay-offs, manning levels and the pace of production.

The situation gave greater relevance to the politics of working-class autonomy, tendencies that had foreseen this outcome. Alongside such analysis, publications by Big Flame and Solidarity gave voice to those directly involved in these actions, serving as a means to communicate information to their workmates at Ford as well as a wider readership. Inspired by recent events in Italy, Big Flame took this as an opportunity to generalise these forms of struggle, but the situation at Ford left it to other groups of workers to challenge the government's pay freeze.

By the beginning of 1974 industrial action by mineworkers resulted in the three-day week, a Conservative policy ostensibly introduced to conserve electricity by placing restrictions on commercial energy use. Heath then called a snap election that February, famously framed as a vote to settle the question: 'Who governs Britain?' This saw the Conservatives lose a parliamentary majority, forcing them into opposition. Within less than five years, a Labour government and then a Conservative one fell, both brought down by workers taking industrial action over incomes policy and industrial relations legislation. Yet, the crisis that such measures set out to address, both in terms of underlying structural issues and social and industrial unrest, remained unresolved.

#### **4. To Hell with the Social Contract, 1974 to 1978**

Following the first of two 1974 general elections, the incoming minority Labour government's attempt to resolve the ongoing crisis of British capitalism took a left-wing social democratic form. In return for concessions in other fields of policy, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) leadership agreed to help implement voluntary pay restraint. Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) General Secretary Jack Jones was widely credited as the architect of this policy, which became known as the Social Contract.<sup>389</sup>

Jones, the leader of the largest union both in the country and at Ford, was deeply and personally invested in the project. While the issues involved went beyond individual personalities, he came to embody the contradictions between the role of trade unions, representing the interests of their members at work, and their political ties to a Labour government. At Ford this situation pushed the trade-union mediation of industrial relations to breaking point. Over the course of the next four years no official industrial action occurred during pay negotiations. Meanwhile, shop-floor unrest became so disruptive to production that management felt the need to take the unprecedented step of increasing pay midway through a contract. The situation became increasingly volatile and spilled over into violence in a number of dramatic incidents, while the Labour government resorted to monetarist austerity policies under the terms of an IMF bailout.

Against this backdrop, Big Flame interventions at Ford began to have a more tangible impact, encouraging workers at the firm to adopt practices initiated by the most militant sections of the workforce. Outside the factory, the politics of working-class autonomy also influenced wider debates at the intersection of the labour movement, far-left politics and academia. Back at Ford, two new workplace groups the Ford Workers Group (FWG) and Ford Langley Action Committee (FLAC)

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<sup>389</sup> Reid, p. 330.

put these politics into practice. Unlike Big Flame, both organisations were made up of Ford workers rather than external militants.

Meanwhile, the firm's British output stagnated, fluctuating between 463,793 and 571,990 vehicles per year between 1974 and 1977. This was consistently well below the 681,394 record set earlier in the decade. Over the same period the British subsidiary reported exceptional growth in pre-tax profits, from a relatively low £8,700,000 in 1974 to £263,000,000 in 1977. This was more than four times greater than the highest figure declared previously.<sup>390</sup> Even allowing for inflation, the devaluation of sterling and the notoriously opaque accountancy practices of transnational corporations, these figures were remarkable. Lower output combined with record-breaking profits indicated that Ford was already moving towards a corporate strategy of reinvesting income from the British subsidiary internationally, rather than back into the Ford Motor Company (Limited). Operations continued to decline, despite Britain joining the EEC. By 1976 the British share of European output fell to twenty-eight per cent. Although another subsidiary became operational in Spain that year, German output continued to grow.<sup>391</sup>

Ford still retained a significant position in the British economy though, as a key employer, a major exporter and a potential source of industrial investment. The possibility that such a large and profitable business might move production abroad continued to have profound political implications too. If anything, the Ford Motor Corporation's strategy took on greater importance for British policy makers the further the subsidiary's operation in Britain went into decline relative to those elsewhere in Europe.

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<sup>390</sup> Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, p. 141.

<sup>391</sup> Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, p. 144.

## Friday Night is Music Night, 1974 to 1975

Ten days before the general election, another round of pay negotiations began at Ford on 18 February 1974. Management opened with an initial offer to increase the basic rate of pay by £2.60 per week. At first the unions rejected this proposal, but rather than responding with a specific claim only called for a 'substantial' wage increase. Afterwards a Big Flame leaflet produced in London derided this vague demand for its failure to 'commit them to anything', leaving workers unable to hold union negotiators to account.<sup>392</sup> Supporting this assessment, at the time the *Financial Times* reported a lack of any serious threat of industrial unrest despite formal union opposition. According to the paper's labour correspondent, the trade unions were divided on a point of strategy. Should they aim for a quick settlement before the election, in case the Conservatives received a new mandate for further wage restraint, or await the outcome of the polls?<sup>393</sup>

In the event, negotiations carried on as Labour formed a minority government. By the time Harold Wilson returned as Prime Minister on 4 March 1974, mass meetings at most plants had already rejected the offer. The same day union negotiators recommended a slightly revised deal, which made no improvement on the £2.60 proposed pay increase. It was only at this point that a narrative began to emerge in the press that portrayed all the previous meetings as poorly attended.<sup>394</sup>

Accusing union leaders of committing 'one of their dirtiest tricks in years', another London Big Flame leaflet called on Ford workers to 'Reject the Offer'. The

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<sup>392</sup> Personal Collection, Big Flame London Ford Group, '£2.60—A Joke!!', 21 February 1974.

<sup>393</sup> Roy Rogers, 'Ford Workers Refuse Pay Offer', *Financial Times* (London, 19 February 1974), p. 1.

<sup>394</sup> Wyles John, 'Halewood Men Reject Ford Stage 3 Offer', *Financial Times* (London, 4 March 1974), p. 29; Roy Rogers, 'Ford Unions Back Stage 3 Offer', *Financial Times* (London, 5 March 1974), p. 19 (p. 3); 'Ford Stage 3 Deal', *Financial Times* (London, 12 March 1974), p. 21.

text went on to list possible forms of industrial action short of a strike: a policy of non-cooperation, a work to rule, an overtime ban, and resistance to mobility of labour or to any future lay-offs. It also proposed an alternative clear demand for '£10 plus, and a guaranteed week's pay, work or no work', without any productivity deal.<sup>395</sup> Framing this demand in terms of the needs of workers, as distinct from those of capital, marked the difference between the politics of working-class autonomy and the conventional trade union demands of an official wage claim.

With Big Flame too marginal for such analysis to have much impact yet, shop-floor opposition to the deal remained too weak, or at least not well enough organised, to influence the outcome. On 15 March union negotiators voted to accept an agreement that fell within the pay limits set by the previous Heath administration.<sup>396</sup> Even Big Flame gauged that there was no mood for a strike, highlighting the limited options available. With high inflation driven further upwards by rising oil prices, the agreement led to a substantial decrease in real wages. Afterwards this situation would highlight the limitations of relying on the trade unions and observing official procedures in terms of meeting the needs of workers, fuelling shop-floor discontent.

The start of the new contract coincided with Labour phasing out the Three-Day Week, a Conservative policy to conserve electricity during the miners strike. This measure came into force at Ford Halewood, but not at Dagenham. Afterwards a Big Flame member from the Merseyside car plant described the effect this had on attitudes among the workforce towards being at work. The shorter working week, he explained, provoked widespread discussion between workers about how long they spent inside the factory. In particular, night shifts on a Friday,

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<sup>395</sup> London, MayDay Rooms, East London Big Flame Collection, [East] London Big Flame Ford Group, 'Reject the Offer', 1974  
<<http://www.eastlondonbigflame.org.uk/files/Reject%20the%20Offer.pdf>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

<sup>396</sup> Desmond Quigley, 'Ford Unions Accept £16m. Stage Three Deal', *Financial Times* (London, 16 March 1974), p. 17.

which was followed by a return to the day shift the following week, significantly shortened the length of the weekend. After the government enforced reduction in working hours came to an end, this became a specific source of resentment, and workers on some sections simply began to skip that shift. Taking up the slogan 'Friday Night is Music Night', Big Flame then launched a campaign encouraging others to join in with such wildcat action. This helped put pressure on shop stewards to call a mass meeting at which a resolution was passed in support of the campaign.<sup>397</sup> Not only did Big Flame's attempt to generalise a refusal of work, which originated on the shop floor independently of the unions, put Italian workerist politics into practice, it also proved effective.

Brian Ashton, who still worked at the Halewood PTA Plant, discussed his own involvement in 'the Friday night dispute' with me in interview. In doing so, he referred to John Bohanna, a militant shop steward who also worked for Ford on Merseyside. Ashton recalled Bohanna describing this as 'the most important strike in the time he worked there, in his thirty years', before adding that it was also 'the most important strike in my seven years'.<sup>398</sup> Ashton remembered being on the first shift assigned to work on a Friday night after full-time work resumed. Workmates on his section discussed their frustration at the resumption of a longer working week, while those on another section known as the High Lines took action. When the buzzer sounded they downed tools spontaneously. Initially, senior stewards responded with hostility to industrial action, so soon after a new contract had been signed. They discouraged workers from attending an initial factory-gate meeting, accused Big Flame of orchestrating events, and threatened participants with the withdrawal of union support if management took disciplinary action.

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<sup>397</sup> Personal Collection, Big Flame London Ford Group, 'More Life Less Speed!', 2 April 1974.

<sup>398</sup> Ashton.

Nonetheless, by that September the *Financial Times* reported that 'for the 19<sup>th</sup> Friday night in succession, 4,000 workers on night shift in the paint, trim and assembly and body stamping plants did not turn up', with the cost to the company estimated at £9,500,000. Workers in the Halewood Press Shop then took unofficial action to secure "'clean-up" pay'.<sup>399</sup> With line workers already receiving such a supplement in recognition of the time they spent doing so before and after every shift, their co-workers tried to get in on the act. Likewise, craftsmen raised an unofficial interim wage demand in an effort to restore pay differentials. Industrial action began to spread to Dagenham, where a high rate of labour turnover left the firm particularly vulnerable. Yet again, a series of informal pay claims that originated on the shop floor threatened to spiral out of control.

The day before parliament was dissolved for the second general election that year, management responded with a statement to the trade union side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC). Acknowledging that 'the circumstances in which it negotiated its current agreement were exceptional', the company proposed a new contract immediately, even though the current one was not due to expire until the following spring. This proposal was, however, subject to an immediate 'return to normal working including overtime' and a discontinuation of 'the extension of line workers preparation and clean up overtime'.<sup>400</sup> That management felt the need to make such a concession indicated the effectiveness of wildcat tactics, while highlighting limitations in the formal labour relations apparatus.

Indeed, the 'Trade Union side were taken by surprise by the Company's offer' as Moss Evans, their chairman on the FNJNC, informed TGWU General Secretary Jack Jones. While recognising that management's proposal failed to address the

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<sup>399</sup> 'Ford Halewood Workers to Strike over Pay', *Financial Times* (London, 7 September 1974), p. 15.

<sup>400</sup> University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, MSS.292E/213/617/1 'Company Statement to N.J.N.C.' 29 September 1974. (*sic*)

issues that gave rise to the talks, the union side of the FNJNC agreed to the proposal. Evans ended his memo by stressing that trade-union negotiators were not responsible for the situation:

‘I cannot do more than emphasise that at no point did we ask the company to negotiate what they term “a new contract”. It was entirely on the initiative of the company that such an offer was made.’<sup>401</sup>

Far from being a welcome outcome, a pay rise for their members so close to the election provided a source of embarrassment for union leaders committed to the Social Contract. On the other hand, Big Flame’s tactic of trying to generalise the struggles of the most militant sections of the workforce was much more closely in synch with the mood on the shop floor, contributing to the outcome.

Afterwards the *Sunday Telegraph* speculated that ‘Ford management’s offer could help re-establish the authority of the unions’. Backing up this suggestion, the piece cited Dagenham Body Plant Deputy Convenor Sid Harraway referring to proposal as ‘a “union negotiator’s dream”’. To show the extent to which union authority was currently under threat, alongside the article an excerpt appeared from a Big Flame leaflet, which read: ‘As the Union Caves in the Fight Begins’. There followed a somewhat sensationalist if not entirely inaccurate account of ‘industrial agitators’ engaging in ‘political warfare’. Predictably enough, this glossed over any relationship between such unrest and working conditions, or company and government policy. While several far-left organisations were mentioned in the article, focus fell primarily on Big Flame and how this group’s approach differed by operating outside of mainstream rank-and-file trade unionism. The author went on

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<sup>401</sup> University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, MSS.292E/213/617/1 ‘Company Statement to N.J.N.C.’ ‘Ford Motor Company’ memo to the General Secretary from the National Organiser 23 September 1974.

to report that such activity had already come to the attention of managers: 'They see it', the piece concluded, 'as a problem for the unions' though.<sup>402</sup>

The company tabled a two-year deal, which included an immediate wage increase of between £7.20 and £9.40 a week, and two further increases both worth between £2.70 and £3.50, a pay rise of almost forty per cent. Within a year of the most recent pay rise, this increased wages well above the rate of inflation. Moreover, the offer included a 'threshold arrangement' to automatically increase pay should the retail price index rise by more than thirty-six per cent. In spite of assurances to the contrary from management and unions alike, this clearly posed a significant challenge to the Social Contract.<sup>403</sup>

That winter Big Flame was singled out in Parliament as 'one of the more inflammatory groups' in Britain.<sup>404</sup> The Conservative Lord Gisborough made these remarks in a speech, which referred specifically to the group's activity at Ford, during the debate of a motion on 'subversive and extremist elements' in the House of Lords. The same session heard the Communist Party and other left-wing organisations described with similar hyperbole. It might be tempting to read too much political significance to Big Flame receiving such a citation in *Hansards*. More than anything, the general tone of proceedings revealed the level of hostility towards any challenge to the status quo from elements within the political establishment.

That said, Big Flame's range of influence was beginning to extend beyond Merseyside during this period with the creation of a national organisation of the same name. Membership would always remain small, even by the meagre standards of the far left in Britain, although to some extent this reflected an

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<sup>402</sup> McGavery Paddy, 'Shop-Floor Power Bid at Ford's', *The Sunday Telegraph* (London, 29 September 1974), p. 17.

<sup>403</sup> Roy Rogers, 'Ford Offers 38 Per Cent. Two-Year Pay Deal', *Financial Times* (London, 4 October 1974), p. 1.

<sup>404</sup> *Hansard Parliamentary Debates: Lords, Fifth Series, 1974-75*, CCCLVII cols 880-81.

emphasis on organising horizontally with other militants rather than recruitment. As indicated by the leaflets mentioned previously, new comrades in east and west London, as well as Manchester and Birmingham, joined existing members on in Liverpool. Initially this led to the formation of a loose federation linked together by a National Co-ordination Committee, leaving local groups with a high degree of autonomy. The First National Conference took place in March 1975. At it the Big Flame Motor Commission reported to their fellow delegates confidently: 'We have better contacts and organisation round the country between the plants than anyone, including the unions, with the exception of the Ford Motor Co.'<sup>405</sup> That such a claim seemed at all credible reflected how poorly coordinated the shop stewards organisation was across the firm's factories, never mind the industrial strategies of larger political organisation.

Before the conference groups from Merseyside and East London also circulated two separate papers entitled *What is a Big Flame Group?* These texts presented alternative proposals for how Big Flame should organise.<sup>406</sup> The authors of both pieces approached this question through a class analysis of the moment of crisis in which they were written. The two papers articulated a shared understanding of how the composition of the working class had been transformed through the expansion of deskilled assembly-line work, highlighting the changing role of migrant labour and that of women in particular. The use of the term *social factory*, which was coined by Mario Tronti, by the authors of both documents demonstrated the common influence of Italian workerism. While distancing themselves from the practice of contemporary Leninism, the authors also framed

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<sup>405</sup> Big Flame Motor Commission, *The Car Industry and Big Flame : Motor Commission Report to Big Flame National Conference* ([n.p.]: Big Flame, 1975), p. 5.

<sup>406</sup> Merseyside Big Flame, 'What Is a Big Flame Group?', 1975 <<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/whatismbf-all.pdf>> [accessed 9 April 2018]; London, MayDay Rooms, East London Big Flame Collection, East London Big Flame, 'What Is a Big Flame Group', 1975 <<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/whatiselbf-all.pdf>> [accessed 9 April 2018].

their proposals in relation to Lenin's writing on the revolutionary party and political strategy too.

All of this demonstrated how a shared understanding of working-class autonomy informed the politics behind these texts. The contribution from East London distinguished between three distinct aspects of workers' autonomy: 'autonomy from capitalist development as in wage drift [...] autonomy from capitalist institutions [...] and] the question of autonomy, separate organisations, and the power relations within the class'.<sup>407</sup> On this final point they argued that recognising such differences constituted a prerequisite for real working class unity. This provided a rationale for supporting autonomous struggles of groups such as women and Black people to break down such internal hierarchies within the working class.

A third contribution to the debate from Manchester disputed any understanding of autonomy that went beyond the need for workers to reject productivity deals and demand wages on the basis of their own needs. The authors of this piece went so far as to dismiss Mario Tronti as 'a guru of the ultra left'.<sup>408</sup> From the outset, Big Flame encompassed a range of viewpoints about the meaning of the term *autonomy* itself, with some disputing whether any theoretical insights could be gained from one of the most prominent figures associated with Italian workerism.

Despite both advocating versions of a politics of working-class autonomy informed by *operaismo*, the most significant divisions proved to be those between Liverpool and east London. Such differences centred on what form of organisational structure to adopt. While recognising that 'Big Flame is neither [a] revolutionary party nor its embryo', members from Merseyside proposed the

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<sup>407</sup>London, MayDay Rooms, East London Big Flame Collection, East London Big Flame, 'What Is a Big Flame Group', p. 3.

<sup>408</sup> London, Goldsmiths University of London Library (Special Collections), Vic Seidler Box 1 [uncatalogued], Pete, *Some Questions to ELBF*, p. 4.

creation of a centrally organised 'interventionist cadre organisation'.<sup>409</sup> From the perspective of East London Big Flame (ELBF), such an approach overlooked how recent struggles by women and migrants called into question not just the content of revolutionary politics, but also its form.<sup>410</sup> The majority of conference delegates then agreed to establish a national organisation, leading ELBF to break away. At the exact moment that this tendency was beginning to have some effect at a national level, the conference exposed internal divisions within what remained small political circles by any standards.

Max Farrar, who helped set up a Big Flame group in Leeds shortly afterwards, subsequently commented on these events. He claimed that 'the ideological difference between ELBF and MBF [Merseyside] was not huge, and that the split was probably as much to do with personalities [...] as to do with ideologies'.<sup>411</sup> That might well have been the case, although it is also striking that the split reflected the influence of different sections of the Italian extra-parliamentary left. *Potere Operaio* (Workers' Power) influenced ELBF politics more and had dissolved into the wider movement by then, whereas *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle) provided a model for Liverpool Big Flame and retained a more formal organisational structure.

While the ELBF Ford Group became inactive within a year, a degree of continuity, in terms of political orientation and some individual participation, remained afterwards with the publishing project *Red Notes* and the Ford Workers Group (FWG) in Dagenham. Unlike Big Flame, the FWG was predominantly made up of Ford workers rather than external militants though. This could be seen as

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<sup>409</sup> Merseyside Big Flame, pp. 9–10.

<sup>410</sup> East London Big Flame, 'What Is a Big Flame Group', 1975, p. 15 <<https://bigflameuk.files.wordpress.com/2009/05/whatiselbf-all.pdf>> [accessed 9 April 2018].

<sup>411</sup> See his comment on archivearchie, 'Episodes in Big Flame History: No 5. 1975 Debate – National Organisation and Autonomy', 2009 <<https://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/2009/05/19/episodes-in-big-flame-history-no-5/>> [accessed 11 April 2018].

putting into practice ELBF's position about new organisational forms emerging from struggle. Framing this as a straightforward causal relationship between ELBF theory and FWG practice, however, would miss the point. Despite such differences, cooperation afterwards between Big Flame and the Ford Workers Group supported the broader thrust of Farrar's argument that the extent of such differences should not be overstated.

Recent historiography has framed demands for greater autonomy by workers and others, such as women and Black people, as an aspect of the emergence of 'popular individualism' in 1970s Britain. Some former Big Flame members that spoke to me went on to make a similar assessment of the 'decline of the salience of class identities' associated with such an analysis.<sup>412</sup> At the time though, they still conceived of such phenomena in terms of class. In doing so, they recognised that an adequate class analysis needed to focus on sexual and racial divisions both within the waged workforce and in terms of the role of unwaged labour in reproducing social relations more generally.

While Big Flame groups thrashed out their political differences, the substantial pay rise at Ford led to a shift in the balance of forces between management and workers, which was documented in a *Solidarity* article.<sup>413</sup> Beforehand, high labour turnover and the firm's inability to recruit workers fast enough to fill vacancies had given greater leverage to those members of the workforce who remained. Afterwards, an influx of new starters made it possible for management to impose mobility of labour within the plant, reducing the scope of workers to exercise control over production. The author of the piece explicitly applied the concept of the refusal of work in his analysis of the situation. Doing so

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<sup>412</sup> Emily Robinson and others, 'Telling Stories about Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the "Crisis" of the 1970s', *20th Century British History*, 28.2 (2017), 268–304 (pp. 268 & 280); Yarnit.

<sup>413</sup> Ed Zell, 'The Dagenham "Occupation"', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 8.2 (1975), 8–6.

placed strategic emphasis on the actions of ordinary workers from the organised wildcat strike to a more atomised reluctance to take up or remain in employment with the firm. This then suggested the basis for future tactical intervention.

Having responded to such a situation through a wage increase, predictably enough, management set out to increase labour productivity and impose tighter discipline. This met with resistance at different plants across the country. For instance, that April eighteen door hangers stopped work at the Dagenham Body Plant in a manning dispute, when eight of their workmates were redeployed to a labour pool with eighty-five others. Then managers in Swansea suspended a number of lathe operators for failing to increase output. In response, shop stewards led a sit-in occupation of the factory. Both incidents stemmed from management attempts to use of the availability of surplus workers, retained and recruited since the pay rise, to increase the intensity of labour for some sections of the workforce, while leaving others idle.<sup>414</sup>

The situation in Swansea was resolved quickly, but in the meantime shop stewards in the Dagenham Body Plant attempted to replicate the tactics used there, when management responded to the door hangers' dispute with mass lay-offs. The Dagenham occupation failed to gain traction though, with low levels of participation from the wider workforce. 'At best', the *Financial Times* reported 'some 30 or 40 of the 1,000 men involved in the dispute were inside the plant yesterday at any one time, picketing the padlocked or barricaded gates'. With production brought to a halt, shop stewards called a mass meeting to shore up their mandate on 1 May 1975, a date chosen to coincide with workers having to come on site to collect pay.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Lorelies Olslager, 'Ford Factories Hit by Protests', *Financial Times* (London, 24 April 1975), p. 40.

<sup>415</sup> Lorelies Olslager, 'Ford Stewards Seek Mandate over "Occupation" Claim', *Financial Times* (London, 1 May 1975), p. 15.

Despite this timing, barely anyone attended the meeting, as was reflected in a vote to continue with the occupation being lost by a mere thirty-nine to thirty-seven. 'It all ended', as *Solidarity* noted wryly, 'with a bunch of disheartened lefties leaving the plant, calling each other "traitors", wailing about the "lack of leadership", all the usual stuff'. On the other hand, the article described the workforce as having 'a healthy distrust of anything coming from the convenors and the shop stewards apparatus', while also feeling 'isolated and unable to control or influence what was going on'.<sup>416</sup> On a practical note, the author called into question the whole rationale for organising an occupation, particularly before alternative tactics had been exhausted.

With the unions' ineffectual role in recent pay negotiations increasingly undermining their credibility, the militant stance adopted by Body Plant shop stewards failed to mobilise the wider workforce. This provided yet another sign of the growing gap between shop-floor workers at Ford and their trade-union representatives, even in terms of the lay leadership of the shop stewards organisation. This situation would only deteriorate further the following year.

### **The Politics of How Autoworkers Fight back**

In January 1976 a project to research the British automobile sector came out of the Institute For Workers Control (IWC) Conference. This exercise was explicitly framed as a 'workers' enquiry'.<sup>417</sup> Adopting this turn of phrase strongly signalled the influence of Italian workerism, although the researchers did not spell this out in their report. While the term *workers' inquiry* can be traced back to a survey

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<sup>416</sup> Zell, p. 5.

<sup>417</sup> IWC Motor Group, *A Workers' Enquiry into the Motor Industry* (London: CSE Books, 1978); see also 'Document: A Workers' Enquiry into the Motor Industry: The Institute for Workers' Control Committee of Enquiry into the Motor Industry', *Capital and Class: Bulletin of the Conference of Socialist Economists*, 1.1 (1977), 102-18.

prepared by Marx for *La Revue socialiste* in 1880, nothing came of it and decades past without the expression gaining further use. It only re-entered the Marxist lexicon with Romano Alquati's co-research study of the Olivetti typewriter factory in the early 1960s.<sup>418</sup>

The content of this report showed other signs of the influence of Italian workerism: a focus 'on the experience of production line workers'; the aim to provide an 'evaluation of the impact of workers' struggle'; and recognition of 'the need for workers to develop an autonomy in ideas and action'. Such ideas were combined in a somewhat piecemeal fashion with the industrial politics of the IWC and enthusiasm for the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards' alternative plan. The authors explained that their work was informed by 'discussions with stewards, convenors, and workers', although it was perhaps telling that the workers came last in a list behind their union representatives. This elided the distance between shop-floor workers and the lay leadership of the trade union, a key issue at the time that the report overlooked. That said, it also showed how *operaismo* began to influence the analysis of sections of the British labour movement beyond the ranks of Big Flame, Solidarity and their fellow travellers.<sup>419</sup>

A more rigorous engagement with Italian workerism took place that spring, when the Conference of Socialist Economists (CSE) republished Big Flame's abridged translation of Gambino's study of Ford in Britain.<sup>420</sup> This coincided with preparations for that year's CSE conference as explained in the introduction to the organisations first pamphlet, which came out later that year:

The Conference of Socialist Economists has encouraged the development of the study of the labour process through local groups, "day schools", and work projects for its 1976

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<sup>418</sup> Haider and Mohandesi.

<sup>419</sup> IWC Motor Group, pp. 7–8 & 71.

<sup>420</sup> Gambino, 'Workers' Struggles and the Development of Ford in Britain (Operai e Stato 1972)'.

annual conference (Coventry, July 10, 11, 12), which has been entirely given over to the labour process and its ramifications [...] <sup>421</sup>

The pamphlet, itself, consisted of five articles, three of which comprised of translated Italian material by Raniero Panzieri, Sergio Bologna and Mario Tronti.

The first piece by Panzieri provided a critical reading of *Capital*, and by extension Leninist politics more generally. For him, too much emphasis on the anarchy of circulation, instead of class antagonism within production, marked the limits of Marx's magnum opus and its political legacy. The *Grundrisse*, Panzieri speculated tentatively, might offer a corrective to this tendency. Bologna's contribution teased out the historical relationship between the politics of German council communism and the technical composition of Labour in pre-war Germany. Tronti provided a similar analysis of labour militancy and the rise of US industry. Taken together, all three texts contributed to the development of a particular Marxist approach to analysing the labour process that placed a specific emphasise on the role of the working class as an antagonistic social subject.

In Britain, such material informed a critical response to Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, which had just come out two years beforehand. Whatever insights Braverman's account provided about the degradation of work, his analysis was explicitly 'about the working class as a class *in itself*, not as a class *for itself*'.<sup>422</sup> As he openly acknowledged, this left out any consideration of working-class subjectivity or agency. The Italian texts in the pamphlet represented a tendency within Marxism that also focused on the labour process, while in contrast with Braverman emphasising the role to working-class struggle as a driver of capitalist development.

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<sup>421</sup> G. and P., p. 2.

<sup>422</sup> Braverman, p. 27 (emphasis in the original).

Paul Thompson, a former member of Big Flame, continues to focus on the labour process as a sociologist today. He has credited 'political activity with shop stewards and shopfloor workers in the motor industry' and 'innovative writings on the changing nature of work and class derived from Italy and France' with informing his research.<sup>423</sup> More recently he also drew attention to two 'interesting, if ultimately unsatisfactory, attempts [...] to synthesise an understanding of the various strands of industrial misbehavior', the work of Pierre DuBois and Geoff Brown from the late-1970s.<sup>424</sup> In fact, DuBois and Brown wrote historical accounts of industrial sabotage. Independently from one another, both writers adopted broad definitions of the term to include a range of different types of action beyond the archetype of machine breaking. They also agreed that, having become marginalised by mid-twentieth-century trade unionism, such practices showed signs of becoming increasingly relevant to the industrial situation at the time.

Brown specifically drew upon two earlier sociological studies: a few brief references to sabotage in Beynon's *Working for Ford*, and a piece on industrial sabotage by Laurie Taylor and Paul Walton from the early 1970s. Taylor and Watson proposed a categorisation of such behaviour based on the subjective intentions of those who engaged in it. This extended from simply wanting to release tension and alleviate boredom, through challenging the pace of work, to attempting to exercise greater control in general. They opened their discussion of this final category with an account of rioting at Fiat Turin in 1969. The section ended with reference to a criminal prosecution for advocating 'sabotage as a legitimate weapon in the class struggle being fought inside Ford Dagenham'. Their

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<sup>423</sup> Paul Thompson, *The Nature of Work*, p. ix.

<sup>424</sup> Paul Thompson, 'All Quiet on the Workplace Front? A Critique of Recent Trends in British Industrial Sociology', *Sociology*, 29.4 (1995), 615–33 (p. 616); Pierre Dubois, *Le sabotage dans l'industrie* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1976); translated as Pierre Dubois, *Sabotage in Industry*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed, Pelican Originals (Hamondsworth: Penguin, 1979); Geoff Brown, *Sabotage: A Study in Industrial Conflict* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1977).

analysis concluded with a prediction that ‘productivity agreements which tend to reduce the workers’ area of autonomy within the factory’ would make the phenomenon even more prevalent.<sup>425</sup>

The relationship between the sociology of industrial sabotage and the politics of working-class autonomy went back further through their sources. The incident referred to at Ford involved the prosecution in 1962 of the UK distributor of a publication featuring an article entitled ‘Sabotage—how autoworkers fight back’. This provided details of how to damage an assembly line. The defendant, reportedly, posted the document to at least three Ford workers. The prosecutor also inferred a causal link between the dissemination of this material and subsequent damage and disruption to production at the Dagenham plant. Pleading not guilty, the defendant described himself as ‘the London representative of *News and Letters*, an American Marxist publication’ edited by the former Detroit auto-worker Charles Denby. This 1970s analysis of sabotage linked back to material circulating among Ford workers in Britain in the 1960s that was published by the Black Marxists who initiated a turn towards the politics of working-class autonomy in America from the 1940s onwards.<sup>426</sup>

Moreover, the whole incident only came to Taylor and Walton’s attention through an article published in *Solidarity*. This piece recorded that an attempted speed-up in the Dagenham foundry on the day of the trial resulted in a deliberate reduction of output. Rather than suggesting a direct connection between these two events, or any involvement of *Solidarity* in either of them, the author claimed that this demonstrated how such disruptive activity was ‘an integral part of their

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<sup>425</sup> Laurie Taylor and Paul Walton, ‘Industrial Sabotage: Motives and Meanings’, in *Images of Deviance*, ed. by Stanley Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 219–45 (pp. 238 & 243).

<sup>426</sup> ‘Sabotage Method in Pamphlet’, *The Times* (London, 24 January 1962), p. 6.

working lives' for many workers.<sup>427</sup> According to *Solidarity*, the failure of Leninists to grasp the significance of such examples of workers' self-activity reflected bureaucratic tendencies inherent in these politics.

Having drawn directly on this material as well as Taylor and Watson's work, Brown concluded by focusing on the current situation in the late-1970s British automobile sector. Sabotage, he claimed, was 'much more common in Fords than in other car plants', a situation he linked to the faster pace of work and the lack of alternative means for workers to exercise job control under measured day work.<sup>428</sup> He then referred to interviews with former Halewood workers, recorded in September 1974. By their account, spontaneous acts of sabotage occurred routinely, for instance when two workers 'slashed every seat of 27 or 28 cars with razor blades and squirted brake fluid on the paint work'.<sup>429</sup> Another example of sabotage saw police cars on the assembly line being singled out: 'Milk bottles, often with some milk left in them, just fitted into the small space behind the dash panel.'

From the distribution of the *News and Letters* pamphlet in 1962 onwards, two elements recurred repeatedly in these accounts. A critical perspective on Leninist politics informed by the politics of working-class autonomy and references to the actions of Ford workers flowed through the course of this reassessment of industrial sabotage. Much of my own research broadly supports this viewpoint.

Alan Hayling recounted a particularly dramatic and coordinated incident to me in interview. In 1975 Hayling, a Cambridge graduate and member of Big Flame, began working at Ford Langley, intending to covertly shoot a film with the Newsreel Collective. Due to a combination of financial and logistical circumstances, the project was never completed, but he decided to continue working at the plant anyway.

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<sup>427</sup> John Lane, 'Who Sabots?', *Solidarity: For Workers' Power*, 2.1 (1962), 15–18 (p. 16).

<sup>428</sup> Geoff Brown, p. 369. (*Sic*).

<sup>429</sup> Geoff Brown, p. 372.

An exceptionally hot summer the following year resulted in mounting tension on the shop floor. This began with workers demanding refreshment breaks. When management refused these, workers simply began to take them without authorisation. This had a negligible cost to the company, since the line speed was increased to maintain output. Yet, management still escalated the situation by docking workers' attendance bonuses. Spontaneous acts of sabotage then became increasingly frequent with one or another of the lines broken every few days to provide a brief respite from the heat and to vent frustration.

As time went on such action became increasingly coordinated, with a shop-floor consensus emerging that any administrative errors in the sequence of cabs should be overlooked. Normally, such mistakes were reported voluntarily, since doing so interrupted production, providing everyone with a brief break while repairs were carried out. Now, output fell out of sequence with customer orders, producing vehicles that could not be readily sold. In the worst cases, left-hand drive cabs ended up on right-hand drive chassis, making the finished trucks undriveable. Management still continued to refuse any concessions over the docked wages though.

Finally, the matter reached a climax in an incident, which linked the dispute over pay to an ongoing safety issue. Workers had previously raised concerns with management about the allocation of a particularly demanding task fitting cabs onto their chassis to a young workmate who was physically unfit for such and arduous task. Alan Hayling gave a vivid account of what happened next:

'Everybody was warned that at some point when he was struggling we wouldn't stop and wait for him [...] The truck would go up in the air, and it would travel around destroying everything: all the air lines; all the tools; there were lots of storage areas; and that's exactly what happened. And of course, when it went back it tore through all of the completed cabs. So, it must have done, probably,

two or three million pounds worth of damage. But, there was nothing that they could say, because they'd been warned that this might happen. [...] They took no notice and then it happened. We just let it happen.'<sup>430</sup>

Afterwards management withdrew all the contested pay deductions. Not only was industrial sabotage an everyday aspect of working life, it sometimes proved to be an effective tool for collective direct action. The breakdown of trade-union mediation at the time made it all the more likely that workers would resort to such unmediated forms of direct action.

Brian Ashton described a similar situation at Halewood. To relieve the pace of production, workers would routinely throw components away, so they could take a break while waiting for stock to be replenished. The theft of car radios became so prevalent that they could only be installed under the surveillance of a security man and immediately before hauliers took responsibility for the vehicles. Another example involved an individual worker refusing to apply the solvent used to install car windows after management failed to address his health concerns about the safety of working with the chemicals.<sup>431</sup>

Other former militants at Ford were keen to distance themselves from these activities though. This might have been due to concerns not to give credence to the right-wing image of car workers as wreckers, as well as scepticism about the political relevance of such activity, which was often atomised and unfocused. While these concerns highlight the hazard of romanticising such activity, the everyday occurrence of sabotage reflected how estranged workers were from deskilled and monotonous assembly-line work. Moreover, such actions also took on an organised and politically motivated character on occasion, as Hayling's account made clear.

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<sup>430</sup> Alan Hayling, 2014.

<sup>431</sup> Ashton.

## **The Union Leadership Cannot Carry the Day, 1976 to 1978**

During the 1976 IMF crisis Treasury projections of a budget deficit, which proved wildly accurate, precipitated a run on the pound that took sterling to its lowest price against the dollar to date. Monetarist austerity policies, which the Labour government adopted as a condition of accepting a bailout loan, severely undermined the terms of the Social Contract.<sup>432</sup>

‘At this precise moment the struggle of Ford Dagenham workers burst on to the scene’, as a Red Notes pamphlet described dramatically.<sup>433</sup> This almost suggested that the intense shop-floor unrest, which coincided with the intervention of the IMF, came about as a direct response to attacks on sterling by currency speculators. An overly literal reading of this might defy credibility. Such rhetoric, however, highlighted how the government increasingly came under attack on two fronts, as it struggled to meet the expectations of big business, while confronted by irreconcilable demands from workers.

Moreover, one of the most violent moments of unrest in the British subsidiary’s history occurred on exactly the same day that the pound suffered record losses against the dollar. On Tuesday 28 September a riot on the nightshift in the Dagenham Body Plant erupted out of a minor dispute after twelve workers walked out over manning levels. Management responded by laying off one-thousand of their workmates. ‘Rioting car workers went on a rampage of destruction’ the *Daily Mirror* reported. An angry mob damaged vehicles, smashed windows and set fires alight inside the plant. When police arrived they met with ‘a hail of missiles’ before workers locked the gates and turned fire hoses on the authorities.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Thorpe, II, p. 143.

<sup>433</sup> *The Little Red Blue Book*, p. 7.

<sup>434</sup> Patrick Long, Stuart Greig, and Palmer Jill, ‘Rioters Smash up Ford Plant’, *Daily Mirror* (London, 29 September 1976), p. 1.

Within two months of this explosive incident, Big Flame held its second National Conference at which debate focused on the best approach to intervening in the crisis. Delegates adopted a strategy referred to as 'the project', which reaffirmed the group's mass working-class political orientation. Afterwards a draft manifesto discussed the formation of 'a new organisation forged inside the struggle and the experiences of vanguard elements of the working class', indicating what the approach entailed. Such an approach was counterposed to the strategies of two Trotskyist groups. The Socialist Workers Party was seen as treating 'the movement only as an appendix to the party', while the International Marxist Group's attempt at a 'regroupment of vanguard organisations on the revolutionary left' was seen as too divorced from 'the masses and their struggle'.<sup>435</sup> Instead of either of these strategies, Big Flame aimed to build an autonomist politics orientated towards the working class.

In more general terms, 'the project' failed in its objective of promoting the formation of an organisation capable of major political interventions from this standpoint. Such an outcome was hardly surprising, since Big Flame's membership by all accounts never exceeded more than a few hundred people. That said, the *Draft Manifesto* set out the perspective that informed their intervention at Ford, which had a much more tangible impact with wider ramifications.

This approach was informed by an analysis of changes to the 'composition of the working class', since the technical recomposition of labour achieved by the introduction of the Fordist assembly line. This included an analysis of sectional, racial and sexual divisions within the working class. Industrial production was situated in relation to the role of housework in the social reproduction of labour

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<sup>435</sup> Big Flame, *Towards a New Revolutionary Socialist Organisation: A Draft Manifesto for Discussion* (Liverpool: Big Flame, 1977), p. viii.

power.<sup>436</sup> Since ‘there can only be effective unity when all sectors of the class are strong enough to see that their own demands are taken up’, autonomous struggles for Black and Women’s liberation were also seen as of political significance.<sup>437</sup>

The same month as the second Big Flame Conference, the group’s much larger Italian ‘sister organisation’ Lotta Continua also held a congress in Rimini. This saw the organisation undergo a crisis in which internal criticisms from women members played a central part. It resulted in the dissolution of the organisation. That March Bologna became the scene of major violent unrest after police shot dead Lotta Continua militant Francesco Lorusso, a key moment in the political shift from *operaismo* to *autonomia*.<sup>438</sup> As well as more diffuse ways of organising, this transition saw broader social issues associated with the women’s movement and youth culture gain greater prominence without entirely displacing industrial politics.

Big Flame’s publication of the *Draft Manifesto* coincided with this moment of social upheaval in Italy. In many ways, the intensity of the situation and the prominence of these politics in Italy underscored Big Flame’s marginality within a relatively stable political context in Britain. That said, Big Flame managed to address the challenges raised by the demand for women’s autonomy in particular without facing such an internal crisis. In some senses, the way in which this mixed-gender group in Britain developed a broader understanding of autonomy within the working class prefigured developments in Italy. While gender politics raised issues for Big Flame from the early 1970s onwards, women managed to articulate feminist politics inside the group without feeling a need to break away, unlike their Italian sisters or others on the left in Britain.<sup>439</sup>

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<sup>436</sup> Big Flame, *Towards a New Revolutionary Socialist Organisation: A Draft Manifesto for Discussion*, pp. 3–7.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> Red Notes, *Italy, 1977-8: Living with an Earthquake*, pp. 17–35 & 81–96.

<sup>439</sup> See, for instance, ‘We Won’t Pay: Women’s Struggle on Tower Hill’.

Another aspect of Big Flame's politics shifted around the same period. By spring 1977 the group's hard-line position on shop stewards had already begun to shift. Marcello Dall'Aglio clarified the group's current stance in a letter on behalf of the National Secretariat in response to a query from a comrade who was not a member. While referring to trade unions as 'the organisational expression of the reformist side of the working class', Dall'Aglio explained that Big Flame members were not barred from standing as shop stewards. In fact, he made clear that some already did so. He went on to describe how 'our approach to the unions is a tactical one' based on their credibility with workers in any specific situation. The group's position continued to emphasise the need to develop alternative forms of organisation that promoted working-class autonomy.<sup>440</sup> As the revolutionary optimism of the early 1970s wore off though, Big Flame combined such aims with a more practical attitude towards engagement with the unionism.

Back at Ford, the Shop Stewards Committee in the Dagenham PTA Plant showed signs of increased militancy with a policy to resist unpaid lay-offs. Such a stance reflected how the assembly plant workforce, which epitomised the mass worker from Big Flame's perspective, was also the most susceptible to lay-offs. Since the final assembly of an automobile required all the component parts to be available, this stage of production was the most vulnerable to disruption.

The struggle over unpaid lay-offs came to a head in Dagenham in June 1977. The incident began with the suspension of a single worker on the door-line section of the Body Plant, Olatunji 'Bill' Taylor by his supervisor, the precise details of which remain unclear. This soon led to widespread unrest. Three days later the Ford Workers Group issued a leaflet, claiming that Taylor 'had a sore arm and

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<sup>440</sup> Salford, Working Class Movement Library, uncatalogued, 'Big Flame Internal Bulletin', May 1977.

asked to be moved, temporarily, to a lighter job'.<sup>441</sup> *The Evening Standard* presented the incident somewhat differently:

Trouble flared after a worker operating a machine for three years was told he was doing it wrongly and was ordered to change. He refused and was suspended for three days.<sup>442</sup>

Whatever exactly took place, his suspension resulted in workmates on the same section walking out in solidarity with Taylor. Management then responded by laying 2500 workers off from the PTA Plant and 1500 others from the Body Plant later that day. This triggered the policy adopted by assembly-plant shop stewards the previous month to resist any further unpaid lay-offs.

Management laid-off the entire workforce of the Body Plant one week into the dispute. In response, 'workers barricaded themselves in the plant and occupied the canteen as a headquarters'. *The Morning Star* reported that workers 'dug seven mock graves outside the foundry—six for named supervisors and one for management' in a provocative display of propaganda.<sup>443</sup>

A more detailed account in *The Little Red Blue Book* gave the piece a more nuanced meaning than a simple threat of violence towards management. The graves also included a tomb of the 'Unknown Ford Worker', as well as those of union officials Mick Murphy and Johnny Davies. Completing the scene, a gallows replete with hangman's noose carried the message 'Ford Disciplinary Procedure—Stage 6'—a joke not lost on those familiar with the five stages of the actual process. This unapologetically partisan account ended on a note of bravado by warning that 'next time [...] the gallows will be for real'. This did not gloss over the anger and militancy that this display was clearly intended to convey. It made clear, however, that those behind the stunt placed responsibility for the violence of the situation

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<sup>441</sup> Reproduced in *The Little Red Blue Book*, p. 28.

<sup>442</sup> Norman Leith, '22,000 Face Total Ford Shut-Down', *Evening Standard* (London, 17 June 1977), p. 1 (p. 1).

<sup>443</sup> 'Pickets on Patrol at Dagenham', *Morning Star* (London, 21 July 1977), p. 3.

with management and directed their hostility towards trade-union officials too, not to mention the humour of the piece.<sup>444</sup>

By 21 July disruption had spread to Southampton and Langley, bringing the total number of workers laid off to 16,000. The next day the *Financial Times* reported that 'a picket line of fork-lift trucks and barrels again prevented supplies from entering some gates of the plant' With industrial action still ongoing the following month, management and officials called a mass meeting, so that the unions could recommend a return to work on terms that had been rejected just a few days earlier. "Go Back" plea at Ford Plant' announced a front-page headline in the *Morning Star*, suggesting Communist Party support for this attempt to end the strike. The author of the piece took seriously an undertaking by officials to bring the issue up again when contract negotiations began that July. He made no mention of PTA Convenor Brian Elliott's opposition to such a policy though, nor to the opinions of the striking workers on his section.<sup>445</sup>

Meanwhile, the PTA Shop Stewards Committee circulated a written statement, calling on assembly plant workers to reject the offer and continue with industrial action. 'Dagenham trade union officials, in liaison with the company', it announced, 'have done everything they can over the past two weeks to demoralise us and drive us back to work'.<sup>446</sup> It went on to describe how officials had excluded any PTA shop stewards from attending talks about the dispute held with union representatives from other plants. Even Elliott had, allegedly, been banned from addressing the meeting because of his refusal to support the settlement.

The following day, the *Morning Star* reported that 'officials were unable to present a 13-point peace formula to an angry mass meeting of the assembly plant

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<sup>444</sup> *The Little Red Blue Book*, p. 43.

<sup>445</sup> Brewster, Charlie, "Go Back" Plea at Ford Plant', *Morning Star* (London, 28 June 1977), p. 1.

<sup>446</sup> Reproduced in *The Little Red Blue Book*, pp. 32–33.

yesterday', indicating that such strong-arm tactics back fired.<sup>447</sup> According to the *Financial Times*, the gathering 'broke up when shop stewards ejected full time union officials' from the meeting and the deal was rejected.<sup>448</sup>

More details came out afterwards in an article published in the first issue of *Fraud News*, a paper initially published jointly by the Ford Workers Group and a new shop floor organisation the Ford Langley Action Committee (FLAC). This piece described the torrent of abuse that met TGWU official Fred 'Blake the snake' when he tried to address the meeting. PTA workers then took over the platform:

The mike was then in the control of the workers. Not just the convenors or the stewards, but the workers too! A very rare event for Ford Dagenham.<sup>449</sup>

Blake retreated to a company office, and management cut the electricity supply to the public address system. A shop steward then produced a megaphone before the power was restored and the meeting resumed. The FWG took this as a lesson in the sort of tactics needed to maintain 'democratic control' of such decision-making process.

Later that month five workers from Langley gave an interview to *The Leveller*. This described to the left-wing magazine's readership how the dispute led to the formation of the Ford Langley Action Committee emerged. FLAC began as an 'initiative of Big Flame militants', they explained, before qualifying this remark with a caveat, 'but they now see it as taking over from Big Flame' within the plant. They also referred to FLAC as 'the local part' of the Ford Workers Group.<sup>450</sup> The piece went on to discuss how assembly-line workers constituted half of the plant's total

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<sup>447</sup> 'Angry Ford's Workers Stay Out', *Morning Star* (London, 29 June 1979), p. 1.

<sup>448</sup> David Churchill, 'Decision To-Day on Ford Peace Bid', *Financial Times* (London, 30 June 1977), p. 15.

<sup>449</sup> 'We Are Not Casual Labour', *Fraud News* (London, October 1977), p. 4.

<sup>450</sup> John Carnegie, 'Voices from the Shopfloor', *The Leveller*, 8, 1977, 28-29.

workforce, but remained underrepresented on the Shop Stewards Committee with its twenty other members easily able to out-vote their eight representatives.

During the dispute in Dagenham, management in Langley announced lay-offs 'at half-an-hours notice without pay' for assembly lines workers.<sup>451</sup> Members of the workforce then decided at a mass meeting to picket the plant. The plant convenor and most of the shop stewards, however, opposed this move. Despite their opposition, industrial action initially had some impact with haulage drivers refusing to break the picket. Without union support the picket quickly collapsed though, leaving just thirty workers to hold out with only two stewards among them. These militants then went on to set up FLAC.

Meanwhile with the strike still ongoing back in Dagenham, another mass meeting took place on Thursday 30 June, just two days after PTA workers last voted to continue industrial action. This time union officials recommended a new agreement including revised procedures that would have given assembly-plant workers a further twenty-four hours notice in case of any future lay-offs. Management still made no concessions over lay-off pay though. According to a *Morning Star* report of a 'sometimes bitter meeting', PTA Convenor Brian Elliot acknowledged that 'the final vote was clear', despite expressing his personal opposition to the outcome.<sup>452</sup>

The *Financial Times* gave a very different account of proceedings, suggesting that the CPGB newspaper's version of events downplayed how deeply divisions still ran. This piece cited Elliot as saying 'that while he would abide by the decision, there would be "an investigation into the vote"'.<sup>453</sup> The PTA convenor went on to allege that as many as one third of those who had taken part in the vote actually

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<sup>451</sup> Ibid.

<sup>452</sup> 'Ford Workers Yes to Lay-Off Plan', *Morning Star* (London, 1 July 1977), p. 3.

<sup>453</sup> Alan Pike, 'Assembly Plant Men at Ford to Go Back', *Financial Times* (London, 1 July 1977), p. 15.

worked in other plants, calling into question the legitimacy of the entire process. Work still resumed after nineteen days of industrial action, which had cost Ford an estimated 18,000 vehicles worth £47,000,000 in lost production.

The account in the *Financial Times* was remarkably consistent with the Ford Workers Group's version of events. This accused management of packing the meeting with 'scabs from other plants' and claimed that 'half of our workers were not notified' of its occurrence.<sup>454</sup> Despite this setback, the FWG assessment of the situation in the PTA Plant still remained positive on the whole. The level of self-organisation and self-confidence among workers compared favourably with that at any time since the 1962 defeat of the Dagenham shop stewards, while increased notice of lay-offs represented a shift in the balance of power in their favour.

Afterwards the British state became further embroiled in industrial relations at Ford through the firm's 'Erika' Programme, a project to replace the small family car the Escort with a new model. Within a month of the strike the Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Industry wrote to his opposite number from 10 Downing Street, briefing the Prime Minister on Ford's plans. This held out the possibility of more than £500,000,000 worth of industrial investment, addressing a key government economic target. The future of 9500 existing jobs and 2500 new ones were at stake. Senior executives at a corporate multinational level considered locating another plant at two possible sites in Britain, one in the North East of England and the other in South Wales. These two locations fell within Special Development Areas, a category covering regions where industrial investment attracted financial support from both central and local government. This meant

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<sup>454</sup> Reproduced in *The Little Red Blue Book*, p. 36.

that public-sector grants worth £150,000,000 promised to cover almost a third of the company's total investment costs.<sup>455</sup>

Despite such incentives, the decision to choose either of these locations was not a foregone conclusion, a point the senior civil servant emphasised in his letter:

As we all recognise however, there are other problems which Ford will have to assess on a hard-headed business basis, particularly continuity of supply, and on this the recent strike in Dagenham cannot have helped our case. Indeed, in the judgment of the Chairman of Ford UK, the chances of the project being located here are less than 50:50. However, the Secretary of State has written to Ford reminding them of the importance which the Government attach to the location of this programme and offering further discussion before any final decision is reached.<sup>456</sup>

Concern to secure this investment drew Ministers further into the micro-politics of shop-floor conflict at Ford.

National pay negotiations at the firm also became the cause for greater political concern. When the contract expired that October, it provided an initial test of phase two of the government's incomes policy. Beforehand, the unions submitted a 'very moderate claim', an achievement with which *Big Flame* credited Communist Deputy Convenor of the Dagenham Body Plant Sid Harraway. No doubt, this reflected the CPGB's ambivalence towards the Social Contract. Harraway originally proposed to the Ford Convenors Committee a ten-point claim including a fifteen per cent pay rise, which then went before the Shop Stewards Conference in Coventry that April. While this threatened to breach the government's ten per cent threshold, it still left the living standards of Ford workers severely eroded by inflation. Such a stance shielded the Labour government from the political fallout of

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<sup>455</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 16/1702, Letter from M. J. Mitchell to Nigel Wicks Esq, 11 July 1977.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

more vigorous opposition to pay restraint. An amendment tabled by shop stewards at the conference, 'calling for a £20 and a 35 hour week', encountered procedural obstruction, preventing it from being put to a vote by delegates.<sup>457</sup> At the only mass meeting called anywhere to consider the claim, another Communist the Chairman of the Langley Shop Stewards Committee ruled out of order a resolution in support of these demands.

When official negotiations opened that September the company responded with an initial offer of between 8.5 and 10.5 per cent. This received a 'cautious response' from Moss Evans, the incoming TGWU General Secretary and chairman of the union side of the FNJNC, who reserved further comment until after consulting senior stewards.<sup>458</sup> Eventually, a deal was reached without any industrial action, which fell just outside the government limits, but avoided any serious political fall out.<sup>459</sup>

Then in the New Year government ministers became preoccupied by unofficial action at Halewood. Industrial unrest stemmed from an attempt by management to impose changes to production in the Press Shop the previous autumn. Beforehand workers on this section rotated between tasks every hour, a concession made to alleviate the monotony of constantly repeating the same activity all day on every shift. The time lost as a result of workers moving between different tasks, however, represented a cost for Ford.

As Managing Director Terrence Beckett described to Secretary of State for Industry Eric Varley, the company also associated this practice with poorer quality output than that of other European Ford plants. Beckett warned the minister that the loss of 14,000 vehicles worth of production to industrial action gave

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<sup>457</sup> 'Ford: Through the Pay Guide-Lines', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (Liverpool, November 1977), p. 3.

<sup>458</sup> Pike, Alan, 'Ford Keeps to 10% Offer as Vital Pay Talks Start', *Financial Times* (London, 17 September 1977), p. 24.

<sup>459</sup> 'Settlements since August 1', *Financial Times* (London, 8 November 1977), p. 18.

ammunition to opponents of the 'Erika' programme, jeopardising future investment in Britain. Varley then informed the TGWU General Secretary of the situation. 'Ford have already been in touch with Moss Evans', he told colleagues in cabinet afterwards, 'and they have formed the impression that this is a case where the union leadership cannot carry the day with their membership', warning them that trade-union officials were unlikely to resolve the situation.<sup>460</sup>

### **Chapter Conclusion**

The Social Contract set out to resolve an ongoing crisis by further integrating the trade unions into the political system for regulating British capitalism. This further exacerbated the break down in trade union mediation of industrial relations in general and at Ford in particular. Against this backdrop, Big Flame's intervention began to have a tangible effect with the 'Friday Night is Music Night' campaign. Such a tactical approach, which sought to generalise the shop-floor refusal of work by more militant sections of the workforce, put Italian workerist theory into practice.

At the same time *Operaismo* began to have some wider theoretical influence on the far-left in Britain, too. It informed the labour process debate, highlighting how technological development came about in response to workers' struggle. The politics of working-class autonomy also shaped contemporary studies of industrial sabotage and a co-research project on the British automobile sector. Meanwhile, the situation at Ford remained unresolved and unmediated shop-floor unrest became increasingly intense after the IMF crisis. Workplace groups with autonomist politics then emerged at Dagenham and Langley, which were

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<sup>460</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 16/1702, Letter from Eric Varley to Albert Booth, 3 February 1978.

coordinated within Ford's workforce. Along with Big Flame, they would take the initiative the following year.

## 5. One in the Eye for Sunny Jim, 1978

*I believe it is crucial that the plan we develop is one which our employes [sic] can be persuaded to accept. The certain alternative of a prolonged dispute would have a devastating effect on the short and long term future of Ford of Britain and its contribution to the British economy.<sup>461</sup>*

H. A. Poling, Chairman Ford of Europe

*I note the pessimism of your letter but I hope that it does not mean that you intend to concede claims only because they are going to be pressed with determination. I cannot agree that the difficulties that must result from operating within the guidelines will be more serious than giving way, although I recognise that standing firm may have serious short-term adverse consequences.<sup>462</sup>*

James Callaghan, Prime Minister

The 1978 Ford national pay strike, while not quite the longest in the firm's history, had more profound political ramifications than any previous dispute in the British subsidiary's history. The company generally played the role of a reluctant third party throughout this dispute, as we shall see in this chapter. Instead, a precarious Labour administration confronted workers at the firm, whose living standards came under attack through a combination of rising prices and government imposed wage restraint. Meanwhile, high labour turnover and recruitment issues at the firm explained management's reluctance to support such a macroeconomic strategy. This breakdown underscored the growing division between the interests of the

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<sup>461</sup> London, National Archives, T377/311 'Pay of Staff in the Motor Car Industry Pay Policy 1978-79 Ford Motor Company', Letter from H. A. Poling to the Prime Minister, 7 September 1978.

<sup>462</sup> London, National Archives, T377/311 'Pay of Staff in the Motor Car Industry Pay Policy 1978-79 Ford Motor Company', Letter from the Prime Minister to H. A. Poling, 13 September 1978.

multinational corporation and those of the British state, which had been closely aligned throughout the post-war era.

The extent to which worker self-organised independently of the trade unions during this dispute also set it apart from previous national pay strikes at Ford. Conflict between the shop stewards and trade union officials, who rarely if ever supported the company's workforce in such conflicts, ran through the history of labour relations at the firm. Increasingly effective interventions informed by autonomist politics followed on from the practice of documenting and disseminating accounts of shop-floor unrest, which went back to the formation of the libertarian socialist group Solidarity in 1960. Such an approach was informed by a critique of rank-and-file trade unionism and a focus on unmediated forms of struggle by shop floor workers. While spontaneous industrial actions occurred during previous national strikes, the extent to which workers organised autonomously of the unions in this dispute was unprecedented at Ford's British subsidiary. The dispute also had more profound historical significance that linked it to a wider moment of transition, the final turning point in the protracted crisis of the long 1970s.

### **Send your Steward to Coventry, the Background**

Six months before the current contract was due to expire at the end of October 1978, shop-floor militants from plants across the country launched a campaign of their own for the upcoming round of pay negotiations. This began with a 'group of ordinary workers from several Ford plants', as they described themselves to their workmates afterwards, calling a meeting in London on 29 April 1978.<sup>463</sup> Before

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<sup>463</sup> Personal Collection, [Ford Workers Combine], 'Send Your Steward to Coventry' [1978]. 'Note the difference between how Combine members described themselves at the time as a 'group of ordinary workers' and their subsequent representation as 'an independent shop stewards' movement' in the account of the

formal pay negotiations had even begun, these members of the workforce took the initiative away from management and the unions—senior lay representatives and full-time officials alike—for the first time in the subsidiary’s history. This marked the beginning of a new national organisation the Ford Workers Combine (FWC). The Combine outlasted this specific pay round and went on to play a part in industrial unrest at the firm for years to come. Its members even attempted to mount a transnational response to a corporation that had increasingly integrated operations across Europe, since the late 1960s.

The Combine began by calling for ‘a simpler, more unified claim—one that is worth fighting for’—in contrast with the 14-point ‘shopping list’ submitted by the unions the previous year. Instead, the group proposed three clear demands: a twenty-pound pay rise, a five-hour reduction to the working week, and a contract with ‘no strings’ (i.e. no productivity deals, penalty clauses or changes to manning levels). From the outset the FWC displayed an ambivalent attitude towards trade unionism. ‘We are’, the first Combine leaflet declared, ‘all active Union members—and we don’t set ourselves up as an alternative to the Union— but we do believe in controlling our own claim.’<sup>464</sup> While firmly situating themselves within the trade-union movement, FWC members also asserted their autonomy as workers from the unions. This went beyond rhetoric and was put into practice by operating outside the structural boundaries of trade unionism, including the increasingly formalised systems of lay representation.

From the outset the Combine provided a vehicle for ‘ordinary’ Ford workers, many of the more militant stewards among them, to organise collectively. Yet, it also came about as a result of a deliberate political intervention. Combine Secretary

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Winter of Discontent most attentive to their role in these events. Tara Martin López, *The Winter of Discontent: Myth, Memory, and History*, Studies in Labour History, 4 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 73.

<sup>464</sup> Ibid.

Alan Hayling explained as much in an article he wrote, under the alias Jack Brown, for a pamphlet issued by Big Flame, a group of which he was a member:

The Organisation [i.e. the Combine] didn't come out of the blue. Its first meeting was called by three workers groups which already had a long history: The Ford Langley Action Committee [FLAC], the Ford Dagenham Workers' Group [FWG] and the Ford Halewood Big Flame Group.<sup>465</sup>

Hayling worked at Langley, a truck plant situated to the west of London, linking FLAC, a workers' group at that factory, to the politics of working-class autonomy. The other two groups the Ford Workers Group in Dagenham and Liverpool Big Flame clearly shared similar connections. On the other hand, the Combine would have a much broader political make-up with 'members of the SWP, Big Flame, the IMG, Militant, a small Marxist-Leninist group and dissident members of the CP' organising collectively in a 'non-sectarian atmosphere' alongside workers with no such party political affiliations.<sup>466</sup>

Big Flame played a key role in initiating the Combine as a means for Ford workers to self-organise. Crucially, such a tactical intervention left strategic control on the shop floor. By then the group's role extended beyond Halewood, where it organised continuously from the early 1970s onwards, as indicated by Big Flame member Alan Hayling's position as National Secretary of the Combine, while working in Slough. The situation in Dagenham was more complicated, since the East London Big Flame (ELBF) was no longer affiliated to the organisation nationally and the ELBF Ford Group was no longer active. The FWG still shared broadly similar politics, though, as well as the ongoing involvement of individuals, perhaps most notably the external militant and Red Notes publisher Ed Emery.

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<sup>465</sup> Jack Brown and Big Flame Industrial Commission, 'The Ford Workers Group (Combine): How One Rank and File Group Played a Major Role in the Struggle', in *Organising to Win: A Political Manual about How to Stop Losing Struggles at Work* (Liverpool: Big Flame, 1981), p. 30 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>466</sup> Ibid.

A report by the Big Flame Industrial Commission to the organisation's third national conference that May set out plans for workplace organising that drew on 'ideas about **mass work**', which constituted for Big Flame members a 'key area of difference' between their own perspective and that of 'other political tendencies on the revolutionary left'. In practice, the Industrial Commission aimed to establish 'a genuine rank and file movement (small r, small f) which goes beyond the limitations of trade unionism, and which also goes beyond the economism and the party domination of the SWP "Rank and File Movement"'.<sup>467</sup>

For those who initiated the Combine, it represented an attempt to overcome contradictions within contemporary Leninism, although participation by members of various Leninist organisations was also required for the project to succeed. In contrast with the external vanguard party that purported to bring revolutionary consciousness to the masses, the aim was to establish a new organisational form that situated leadership within the working class itself. In spite of the involvement of ex-students turned industrial militants, such as Hayling and Emery, this put into practice a critique of the idea of intellectuals as an external source of political leadership for working-class struggle. Despite the relative marginality of autonomist politics on the far-left in Britain and limited success in generalising such practices, they played a central role in how the strike played out. This outcome then set the terms for a series of disputes with much wider political ramifications in what proved to be a pivotal historical moment, a conjuncture to which we will return.

The Combine's shop-floor campaign got into gear even before the manual trade unions at Ford decided the official wage claim. That May convenors from all the firm's plants met to draft a set of demands. Instead of reporting on the outcome

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<sup>467</sup> 'Big Flame Conference', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (Liverpool, May 1978), pp. 6–7 (p. 7), (emphasis in the original).

of this meeting, the next day's issue of the Communist daily paper the *Morning Star* announced the circulation of an anti-nuclear petition in the Body Plant, a remarkably anodyne story to cover in the circumstances.<sup>468</sup> Presumably, this reflected what the authors of one unofficial party history termed 'the ambiguity of Communists to the Social Contract'. Support for allies on the Broad Left who were committed to the policy, most notably Jones and Scanlon, tempered the party's formal opposition.<sup>469</sup>

Alternative accounts of the meeting left unclear exactly what took place. A report in *Big Flame* that June depicted the committee's proposals as so vague it left negotiators plenty of scope to compromise on the key issues. According to the author of this piece, 'convenors haven't specified any amount of money in their version of the claim', a position concealed 'behind an extensive shopping list including holiday pay, sick pay, time allowance', precisely the outcome the Combine aimed to avoid.<sup>470</sup> The FWC's first leaflet, which came out between this meeting and a national shop-stewards conference on 4 June, put the matter in a more favourable light. 'As a result of national shop floor pressure', it announced, 'the national Convenor's Committee, meeting in London on Friday May 19<sup>th</sup>, agreed to support the 2 main points—£20 rise, and 5 hours off the week with no loss of pay'.<sup>471</sup> In the next issue of *Big Flame* Alan Hayling went into greater detail, describing how 'several leading stewards and convenors who want[ed] to avoid a fight with the Labour Government and the TUC at all costs [...] particularly in an election year' left the committee divided. According to his account, an agreement to 'support the

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<sup>468</sup> 'Neutron Bomb Petition at Fords', *Morning Star* (London, 20 May 1978), p. 5.

<sup>469</sup> James Eaden and David Renton, *The Communist Party of Great Britain since 1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 163.

<sup>470</sup> 'Ford Workers Combine', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (Liverpool, June 1978), p. 3.

<sup>471</sup> 'Send your Steward to Coventry!'.

claim for £20 and 5 hours off the week' was only passed with a majority of a single vote 13 to 12.<sup>472</sup>

Steve Hart, a Ford worker who went on to become a union official, subsequently emphasised his own role in mediating between the unions and the shop-floor militants:

I argued at the Ford Workers Group [...] that as it was an ambitious claim from the official unions it would be sensible for the FWG and the official unions to align their demands—rather than counterposing one against the other. And I think that worked very well—all pulling in the same direction.<sup>473</sup>

Hart's recollections certainly suggested that the Combine already represented a force to be reckoned with, even before the official pay claim had been made. Why else would the alignment of their position have mattered? His account, however, glossed over how gradual and limited reconciliation proved to be in practice.

The first leaflet that the Combine issued certainly suggested that differences still remained between union representatives and the wider workforce after the convenors meeting. A headline slogan called on readers to 'Send your Steward to Coventry!' This turn of phrase summed up the Combine's ambivalence towards trade unionism, meriting further consideration even at the risk of dissecting a joke to death. Literally, workers were encouraged to ensure the attendance of delegates at the National Shop Stewards Conference in Coventry. The choice of wording also contained an idiomatic threat though, however jocular in tone, to ostracise any delegates who failed to support the Combine's position. While still recognising the need to operate within the institutional framework of the unions, the shop-floor

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<sup>472</sup> Jack Brown, 'Ford Pay Claim—A Turning Point for the Working Class', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (Liverpool, July 1978), p. 11.

<sup>473</sup> Cited in Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 127. While this suggested to Cohen that 'a relatively strong stand by the officials may have been influenced by the rank and file Ford Workers Combine Committee', she makes no further mention of the Combine's existence before 1984.

campaign asserted independence not just from union officials but also from the formal leadership of the shop stewards.

The week before the Coventry conference, 14,000 copies of the leaflet were distributed at Ford plants across the country. At the meeting some convenors tried unsuccessfully to prevent the text from being circulated. While also accepting the inclusion of six other demands with the claim, delegates voted to support the call for a twenty-pound pay rise and a five-hour reduction to the working week. So far as different positions were reconciled and open conflict avoided, convenors clearly responded to pressure from below by backing a more ambitious claim. Afterwards a report in *Socialist Worker* warned that this still left plenty of scope for negotiators to 'wheel and deal from one fringe benefit to another, instead of keeping central the question of pay', the very situation the Combine aimed to avoid.<sup>474</sup> Throughout the dispute this group continued to raise the original three demands, disregarding other aspects of the official claim as a distraction, as we shall see.

Meanwhile, the Combine continued to produce and distribute other campaign resources, leading up to the negotiations. Brian Ashton, by then an external militant living in East London having resigned from Halewood the previous year, later described in interview how the wider workforce received this material:

At this point the Combine were producing badges [...] '£10 on the Pay, An hour off the Day'. And, the feeling within the Combine, certainly in Dagenham and maybe Langley in West London, was it's not gonna happen; there's not gonna be a dispute. Then guys started selling the badges. [...] Guys were grabbing them. [...] There was obviously something there going on that people hadn't picked up on, but once

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<sup>474</sup> Martin Jones, 'Ford: Keep Your Eye on That £250m Profit', *Socialist Worker* (London, 10 July 1978), p. 14.

people started taking the badge and wearing it, you sort of knew that it was gonna blow.<sup>475</sup>

Ashton went on to describe visiting a local Women's Co-operative to screen-print T-shirts with the subverted 'Fraud' logo. He recalled an initial run of a few hundred being sold for £5 each. Such resources spread the Combine's message and helped raise funds. More importantly, they helped their other workmates show support for the demands.

The week after the Coventry conference the Combine held another national meeting at the General Picton pub in Islington, north London. Beforehand, organisers invited 'Ford workers and their wives/husbands or girlfriends/boyfriends' to come along.<sup>476</sup> As we have already seen, the involvement of women in industrial action, both as employees and as housewives, was nothing new at the firm. For the predominantly female partners of Ford's overwhelmingly male workforce to receive such an open invitation to participate as equals in such a collective decision-making process was unprecedented though. The Combine continued to advocate such an inclusive approach to organising throughout the strike itself and for years afterwards.

Race relations had an important bearing on the situation at Ford too. By then the Imperial Typewriters strike and Grunwick dispute, which was still ongoing, had seen migrant workers take action that met with hostility from some white co-workers and inconsistent support from the wider labour movement. Meanwhile, outside the factory Black and Asian youth led resistance to a spate of racist attacks and murders, which the government's contradictory policies on immigration and race relations helped to fuel. Against this backdrop, Black socialists and labour activists developed an autonomous liberation politics of their own. A broad

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<sup>475</sup> Ashton.

<sup>476</sup> 'About the Ford (UK) Workers Combine', *Big Flame* (Liverpool, July 1978), p. 11.

political conception of what it meant to be Black informed the movement at the time instead of any narrower culturally determined definition.<sup>477</sup>

Two days after the Coventry Conference the racialised division of labour at Ford came to the fore, when a section of the workforce not known for their militancy took industrial action. This began when management decided to reinstate a Black production worker, following disciplinary procedures for having allegedly punched a foreman who docked two hours' pay from him. Hundreds of foremen in the Dagenham Body and PTA Plants then went on strike. The *Daily Mail* referred to the incident as having 'racial overtones'. Depicting such workplace violence as commonplace, an anonymous paint sprayer told the paper that '90 per cent of the trouble involved coloured [*sic*] workers' who could purportedly no longer be sacked because of the Race Relations Act. In the same piece an unnamed maintenance engineer described Black-on-White violence as an everyday occurrence. 'Most of us get along with the coloureds [*sic*]', the interviewee added, dismissing any suggestion of prejudice on his part, before betraying his underlying prejudice with the qualifying remark, 'but there's always a few troublemakers'.<sup>478</sup>

While drawing attention to racial divisions between Ford employees, the foremen's strike did not go according to plan. Confronted with the prospect of being laid-off, production workers decided at shop-floor meetings to carry on with their work unsupervised. An account of what happened next, as recounted by a shop steward, appeared in *Socialist Worker*: 'We controlled the line and we got quality cars. The quality was the best for years. We produced what we wanted to produce.' In the same piece another steward described attempting to persuade

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<sup>477</sup> A. Sivanandan, 'From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain', *Race & Class*, XXIII.2/3 (1981), 111-52.

<sup>478</sup> Michael Edwards, 'Foremen Walk Out in Fear', *Daily Mail* (London, 7 June 1978), pp. 1-2.

workers on his section to exceed their hourly target of fifteen cars and produce eighteen instead.<sup>479</sup>

Others, shop stewards among them, displayed less zeal for such productivism. In the next issue of the paper Gordon Davie emphasised the need to keep focus on the underlying reason for their actions. 'A pity some stewards see themselves as substitute foremen', Davie noted wryly before spelling out the point. 'We worked', he explained, 'to stop the foremen's strike putting pressure (by loosing production) on the company to sack a worker',<sup>480</sup> an aim which had been achieved.

This highlighted different attitudes towards work on the shop floor at Ford. Let us consider them for a moment before returning to the issue of race. While *Socialist Worker* served as a forum for discussions between militants at Ford, it also reflected the perspective of the party that produced it. At the time the SWP's rank-and-file industrial strategy, as well as the 'Right to Work' campaign, were modelled on Communist-led campaigns that primarily involved organising skilled workers before the Second World War. By contrast, Big Flame and others influenced by *operaismo*, for instance in the Claimants Union (CU), took a different view. Perceiving that 'the struggle around unemployment is much more than the struggle for the "right to work"', they contended that there was a contradiction between the 'struggle for a society freed from wage slavery' and raising a political demand for work.<sup>481</sup> While the contribution of Davie, an SWP member, showed that such differences should not be overstated, an autonomist perspective would have been more alert to the Stakhanovism of the other two shop stewards, particularly given their union roles.

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<sup>479</sup> 'Ford: So Who Needs Foremen?', *Socialist Worker*, 17 June 1978, p. 16.

<sup>480</sup> Gordon Davie, 'Letters, Ford: An Upside-Down Road to Victory?', *Socialist Worker* (London, 24 June 1978), p. 6.

<sup>481</sup> 'Unemployment: Right to Live', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (Liverpool, May 1978), p. 4.

At any rate, both letters also cast new light on the race-relations situation depicted in the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper that had not changed hands since the infamous 1934 headline ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts!’<sup>482</sup> There were clearly multiple connections between the multi-ethnic workforce at Ford and the incendiary anti-immigrant politics erupting across East London. That spring Victoria Park hosted the first Rock against Racism Carnival against the Nazis. As well as responding to a racist tirade by the musician Eric Clapton, this event also voiced opposition to a wave of racist street violence instigated by the National Front. That May shop stewards in the Dagenham Engine Plant, reportedly, purchased 500 Anti Nazi League badges, reselling more than half of them to workers on a single shift. The Body Plant Shop Stewards Committee also affiliated to the campaign.<sup>483</sup>

More importantly, the following month thousands of Asian workers in East London went on strike in response to a series of racist murders, picketing police stations in protest at the authorities’ lack of response to such attacks. ‘Many of the Asian and Black workers stayed away from work’ at Ford, Dagenham shop steward Shuel Uddin told *Socialist Worker*, adding that ‘[i]t was good to see white workers coming out as well and many more supporting our action’.<sup>484</sup> When another incident at Ford led the *Evening News* to print the sensationalist headline ‘60 Asians Mob Foreman’, *Big Flame* responded that such actions ‘express[ed] the anger of Black workers who experience[d] constant harassment’. Illustrating the point with reference to how prevalent racist graffiti was within the PTA Plant, the piece went on to explain that those who confronted the foreman suspected him of involvement in an assault on one of their workmates.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>482</sup> Viscount Rothermere, ‘Hurrah for the Blackshirts!’, *Daily Mail*, 15 January 1934, p. 10.

<sup>483</sup> ‘The Red Arrow—That’s the New Model at Ford’, *Socialist Worker* (London, 27 May 1978), p. 5.

<sup>484</sup> Rahim Ali, Shuel Uddin, and Dave Albury, ‘Birth of Our Power’, *Socialist Worker* (London, 22 July 1978), p. 1.

<sup>485</sup> ‘Rolling Back Racism’, *Big Flame* (Liverpool, August 1978), p. 12.

Acknowledging racial conflict within the workforce should not obscure the anti-racist solidarity shown by some white workers or the class dynamics also at play. All the same, an adequate class analysis also needs to address how the division of labour was racialised at Ford in Britain. Beginning with a distinct section of Irish workers in the Foundry from the 1930s onwards, migrant labour at Ford followed broader trends of post-war immigration from the Caribbean and South Asia, traces of which we have seen in previous chapters. Following this quasi-technical recomposition of labour, members of these groups went on to play an increasingly prominent part in industrial unrest throughout the 1970s. By the late 1970s this resulted in a moment of political recomposition of the working class, both at Ford and in Britain more generally.

Recognising the significance of how race and gender contributed to the context of the 1978 strike should not detract from the class dynamics at play. As negotiations drew closer, *Workers' Action*, a Ford bulletin published by a small Trotskyist organisation, leaked extracts of an internal company report on industrial relations. This listed management's recent achievements: the dismissal of militant stewards with no disruption; closure of the River Plant Press Shop with union support; and restrictions imposed on the rights of workers to representation in disciplinary cases. The document also outlined future plans to control militant stewards and resist demands for lay-off pay. Apart from exposing a cynical approach to industrial relations, this leak made clear managers' confidence in their ability to dictate terms to the unions effectively.<sup>486</sup>

Writing pseudonymously in *Big Flame* that July, Alan Hayling examined the position in which this situation left the company's workforce. Over the past three years, the firm's profits multiplied by three-thousand per cent while the real income of workers had fallen by twenty-nine per cent. Meanwhile, 'newly knighted

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<sup>486</sup> 'Workers' Action: Revealed—Ford's Secret of Success' in Personal Papers.

Chairman of Ford Britain' Sir Terence Beckett's received a pay rise of eighty per cent the previous year, as against fifteen per cent awarded to the hourly paid workforce. Describing the Social Contract as a source of power and status for union officials, which only delivered workers falling living standards, he went on to speculate about the political implications of winning a pay claim that met their demands:

If we win it'll be the end of the Social Contract. It will mean that one of the major obstacles to working class struggle will have been swept away. It'll mean that all sections of the working class will have a little more space to struggle against lousy pay, unemployment, harder work and the cuts in public spending. It could be a turning point but we'll need a great deal of support—to even begin the fight.<sup>487</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it is hard not to see a naive optimism in this assessment, since the defeat of the Social Contract turned out to be a Pyrrhic victory. But we should also see this source for what it is: not a dispassionate work of analysis, but a politically engaged piece of propaganda requiring a certain Gramscian optimism of the will. In any case, Hayling gave a clear assessment of the leverage available to Ford workers, as well as another reminder of why they felt the need to exercise such power.

A review appeared alongside his article of *The Worker Photographer*, a new journal in the form of a double-sided A2 broadsheet published by the photographer Terry Dennett. Inspired by 1930s Communist agitprop, the first issue carried the title 'Fighting Fords Layoffs' and featured a poster on one side composed of photographs of industrial action in Dagenham over recent years.<sup>488</sup> The accompanying text described how the Ford Workers Group curated a slide show exhibition of the images, many of which were their own photographs. *The Little Red*

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<sup>487</sup> Jack Brown, 'Ford Pay Claim—A Turning Point for the Working Class'.

<sup>488</sup> Terry Dennett, 'Fighting Fords Layoffs', *The Worker Photographer*, 1, 1978, n.p.

*Blue Book*, a Red Notes pamphlet published the same year, reviewed the same period of struggle. Just before the 1978 strike Counter Information Services, an anonymous group of non-aligned radical journalists, also published an 'Anti-Report' on Ford.<sup>489</sup> The impact these documents had at the time is difficult to assess, but they at least showed how the Combine drew external support from a number of sources capable of producing sharp and engaging material. Aside from yet another dry and technocratic wage claim, the lack of any comparable resources from the trade unions was striking.

As the start of pay negotiations drew closer, a widening gulf between the company and the government became increasingly apparent. On 13 July Ford Director of Employee Relations Bob Ramsay called J. G. Littler, the Deputy Secretary responsible for counter inflation policy at the Treasury. Ramsay spoke to Littler in anticipation of the release of a white paper announcing phase four of the government's incomes policy. The company director asked the senior civil servant if the new approach would be 'broadly similar to that of this year, only worse', a rhetorical question signalling Ford management's views. In response, Littler suggested that he perhaps meant to say 'better—or more ambitious'—an equally pointed reply.<sup>490</sup> Before formal negotiations even began, strain began to show between the government's wage restraint policy and the company's need to recruit and retain workers.

### **Join the Action Now, the Strike**

Official negotiations began at a Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee (FNJNC) meeting in London on 21 September, with a lobby of Ford workers organised by

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<sup>489</sup> Counter Information Services, *The Ford Motor Company, Anti Report*, 20 (London: Counter Information Services, 1978).

<sup>490</sup> London, National Archives, T377/311, J. G. Littler, 'Confidential Note for the Record', 13 July 1978, p.1.

the Combine greeting committee members outside the venue. Management opened the talks with an offer to increase the basic rate of pay by five per cent, consistent with government policy. Any additional increases, they proposed, should be achieved through a productivity deal. While expressing disappointment with the offer, the initial response of TGWU National Organiser and Chairman of the FNJNC union side Ron Todd was 'to persuade his colleagues to keep talking to the company', effectively accepting the proposal as the basis for a deal.<sup>491</sup> The most militant shop stewards, however, saw no point in negotiating further, so long as the company remained committed to the limits imposed by phase four. Meanwhile, many workers took matters into their own hands with spontaneous walkouts from Southampton and the Body Plant in Halewood within hours of the meeting. The strike was on.

Later that day the Combine issued a leaflet in Langley. 'Let's Join the Action Now', it urged their workmates, informing them of how workers in Halewood and Southampton responded to the offer. Text added to the back of the leaflet overnight provided further updates. 'Stop Press: Langley Night Shift Goes Home', it announced to those who started their shift the next morning. The text went on to describe how a mass meeting on one section decided to walk out immediately, while two others deferred action until convenors reported back to them.<sup>492</sup>

To prepare for mass meetings scheduled at most plants on Monday 25 September, the Combine then produced another leaflet headed 'All out Today!'. This summarised recent developments, reiterated the three demands and discussed possible tactics, such as the use of flying pickets, while calling on workmates to stand firm:

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<sup>491</sup> Alan Pike, 'Ford Workers Walk out after 5% Pay Offer Is Made', *Financial Times* (London, 22 September 1978), p. 1.

<sup>492</sup> Personal Collection, Ford (UK) Workers' Combine (Langley Branch), 'The Offer: Let's Join the Action Now', [21-22/09/78].

‘The unions were forced to take action by the Mass walkouts. [...] The strike is on. [...] Some Union negotiators are already telling the Press that they will accept a “Productivity Deal”. [...] We won’t accept it. [...] Don’t just leave it to someone else. [...] [L]et’s get it ORGANISED!’<sup>493</sup>

By the end of the day, most of Ford’s hourly paid workforce was on strike, bringing the firm’s operations to a standstill before the remaining plants voted to join them the next day.<sup>494</sup>

Afterwards Ford of Europe Chairman H. A. ‘Red’ Poling wrote to the Prime Minister concerning ‘the dangerous and unprecedented industrial situation’ faced by the firm. In his letter Polling raised with Callaghan the unions’ decision to withdraw from talks until management agreed to negotiate ‘in a free collective bargaining situation’, unrestricted by phase four. ‘The issue’, he observed caustically, ‘becomes one of principle between the Government and Trade Union movement’.<sup>495</sup> Polling reiterated that, instead of excessive wage demands, labour shortages represented management’s main concern with the firm finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain workers.

That Friday the Combine organised a flying picket of the port of Harwich, securing the agreement of road haulage drivers not to handle goods for Ford. Dockers, rail workers and seamen across the country took similar action in solidarity with the strike. The same day the FWC organised a lobby of a meeting of the FNJNC union side. *Ford News* reported that a proposal to start ‘informal talks’ with the Company to negotiate a productivity deal was narrowly defeated by

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<sup>493</sup> Personal Collection, Ford (UK) Workers Combine ‘All out Today!’ [25 September 1978].

<sup>494</sup> Alan Pike, ‘Shutdown at Ford Almost Complete as More Join Strike’, *Financial Times* (London, 26 September), p. 1.

<sup>495</sup> London, National Archives, PREM 16/1708, Letter from H. A. Poling to the Prime Minister, 25 September 1978. The role that labour shortages played in the breakdown in alignment between the ‘national interest’ and that of Ford supported the view that a strategy of refusal constituted a significant aspect of class struggle, which drove capitalist development in this period.

twenty-one votes to twenty-four, the motion mainly finding support from full-time officials.<sup>496</sup>

The following Monday Beckett, Ford of Britain managing Director, updated the Chancellor of the Exchequer on developments, following the outcome of the union negotiator's meeting. Afterwards Ron Todd called Beckett to inform him of the union decision not to resume talks. Beckett still managed to persuade Todd to meet him privately though. 'I should add', the Ford Managing Director emphasised to Healey, 'that the union were most concerned that this informal exchange be kept confidential as it took place without the authority of the trade union side of the NJNC.'<sup>497</sup> This led nowhere, but Todd's agreement to an unauthorised meeting and lack of candour about it afterwards suggested just how committed the union official was to the claim, despite his inability to side step the FNJNC as was done in 1971.

Ministers soon had further concerns to worry about. At the beginning of October delegates at the Labour Party Conference dealt the government a 'massive defeat' on wage restraint, voting 'by a majority of more than two to one' against the incomes policy. Despite this setback, ministers reportedly remained defiant, reflecting the lack of available alternatives they saw.<sup>498</sup>

Meanwhile, the Ford Dagenham shop stewards strike committee called a 'Day of Action' on Wednesday 11 October to demand 'free collective bargaining, a 35 hr week, higher wages and rejection of 5% limit'.<sup>499</sup> On the day Ford workers marched from Tower Hill in East London to Central Hall in Westminster, where speakers including Ron Todd and Jo Richardson MP addressed their rally.

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<sup>496</sup> 'Ford UK Paralysed', *Ford Strike News* (London, 5 October 1978), 2 edition, p. 1.

<sup>497</sup> London, National Archives, T377/312, Letter from Sir Terrence Beckett to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, 2 October 1978.

<sup>498</sup> Richard Evans, 'Cabinet Likely to Defy Pay Vote', *Financial Times* (London, 3 October 1978), p. 1.

<sup>499</sup> London, TUC Library, HD 9710.6, Ford Shop Stewards Strike Committee Invites all Workers to Support a Day of Action.

Later that week the Combine recorded a single to raise money for the strike fund and boost the morale of their workmates. On the A-side 'The Ford Strike Song' repurposed the music and some of the original lyrics to 'I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag' by Country Joe and the Fish, an anthem of the anti-Vietnam War movement. A choir of Ford workers belted out the chorus:

And it's one, two, three, what are we fighting for?  
You can stuff your five per cent,  
'Cause that won't pay the rent,  
And it's five, six, seven, picketing the factory gates,  
Its one in the eye for Sonny Jim,  
Whoopee! We're gonna win.<sup>500</sup>

This defiant refrain emphasised the political character of the strike, depicting it as a direct attack on James Callaghan's fragile administration.

While this song harked back to the Woodstock music festival almost a decade earlier, the B-side had a more contemporary quality. It opened with a sound recording of the Day of Action demonstration, providing an introduction to 'Johnny Strika', a track on which the influence of punk could be heard clearly. This lyrical content of song also struck a different note:

They call me Johnny, Johnny, Johnny Strika  
But I'm no radical man,  
I'm an "A"-Shift, Day-Shift, Ordinary Harry,  
From Motor City Dagenham,<sup>501</sup>

The defiant militancy of the previous track gave way to indignation at the depiction by the right-wing press of car workers as *wreckers*, who welcomed any excuse to disrupt production. This obscured the working conditions that lay behind unrest in the sector.

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<sup>500</sup> OHC and the Gappers, *Ford Strike Song*, 1978. A handwritten note identifying OHC as Ed Emery was deposited with a copy of this recording held in London, British Library, 1SE0104157 'Ford Workers on Strike'. Emery also edited the Red Notes pamphlets and translated many relevant texts from Italian, lending credibility to an interpretation of the lyrics that emphasises the political content of workers industrial struggles.

<sup>501</sup> George Chriba, *Johnny Strika*, 1978.

Later that month Alex Gungi, a Black worker at Ford Langley who was active in the Combine, contributed the main text for *Why Black People should Support the Ford Strike*, a Black Socialist Alliance (BSA) pamphlet. Ambalavaner Sivanandan, director of the Institute of Race Relations, later recalled how the BSA provided a national body for Afro-Caribbean, African and Asian workers who broke away from a left that 'did not speak to the Black experience' at the time.<sup>502</sup> In the circumstances, BSA support provided another indication of how atypical the Combine was of the mainstream labour movement at the time.

In the pamphlet Gungi estimated that 'West Indians and Asians' made up around half of Ford's workforce, before describing how the division of labour within the plant fell along the lines of race. He went on to explain how after the 1971 strike when 'people created a stink', management appointed four new Black foremen and a single Black general foreman, but then made no further promotions of Black workers in the intervening years. Gungi also noted that 'black shop stewards don't tend to be senior shop stewards', pointing out the racial hierarchies also reproduced within the unions.<sup>503</sup> That the BSA called on Black people to support and make donations to the Combine, in which Black and white workers organised together, indicated the positive role this group played in challenging such racial divisions.

The same publication included a short piece 'taken from comments made by Alex Gungi's wife Julie'. Her contribution began by confronting the reader with how men, including those at Ford, who felt 'hung up and strung up' by work frequently took out their frustrations violently at home. Having raised such a potentially divisive issue, she went on to assert women's support for the strike, which, she stressed, was also in their own interest. Yet, she criticised the failure of many men

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<sup>502</sup> Sivanandan, p. 143.

<sup>503</sup> Alex Gungi and Julie Gungi, *Why Black People Should Support the Ford Strike* (London: Black Socialist Alliance, 1978), pp. 3-4.

to 'discuss [the dispute] with their wives', while acknowledging that she too had found it a challenge to communicate with others in her position. Rather than shying away from the subject, the potential for domestic relationships to constitute a potential point of weakness in the strike was confronted directly.

Others opposed to the strike sought to exploit this possibility too. On Wednesday 18 October Southern Television broadcast an appeal by two Ford workers' wives. They invited other women to attend an event in Southampton that Saturday to call for a return to work.<sup>504</sup> This met with a robust response of a group of women whose partners worked in Dagenham, Langley and Southampton as described in the next issue of *Ford Strike News*:

We marched to the meeting—there were 6 [...] “ladies” surrounded by T.V. cameras. Our numbers grew to nearly 200 and the argument started—we won the arguments, the meeting, the day—and we don't think [the organiser] will dare raise her voice again!<sup>505</sup>

A photograph accompanied the piece showing a group, mainly made up of women, carrying placards with slogans such as 'Don't Scab on your Husband'. A woman in a *Fraud* t-shirt stood in the foreground, her mouth open and her index finger pointing forward as she addressed someone behind the camera. 'The Ford Wives Strike Support Group', which shared a contact address with the Combine, raised an assertive female voice in support of the strike. No doubt, the FWC's active encouragement of women's participation from the outset ensured such a prompt and forceful response.

Two other pieces addressed to women whose partners were on strike appeared on the same page of the strike newsletter. The first of these argued that, as '*the ones* that have to make ends meet on a wage packet that's been CUT BY

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<sup>504</sup> 'Fords International', *Morning Star* (London, 20 October 1978), pp. 1 & 3.

<sup>505</sup> 'Southampton: Ford Wives' Support Group Says: We Won the Day!', *Ford Strike News*, [26 October 1978], No. 5, p. 2.

28%', they had a direct interest in supporting the strike. An account of housework, which included dealing with 'husbands being worn out and bad tempered [...] because of the lousy shifts and long hours', expressed the issues raised by an autonomist feminist analysis of social reproduction in everyday language.<sup>506</sup> It also made the case that the issue of low pay gave those women who earned a wage of their own another reason to support an assault on the five-per-cent limit, which posed an obstacle to resolving the gender pay gap.

The third article discussed entitlement to social security payments and strategies for claiming them. Specifically, it referred to the situation in Langley of some single strikers (i.e. those with no dependents who would not generally be entitled to claim anything on their own behalf). A few of them, it announced, managed to 'win social security money—because of strong pressure from the social security sub committee of the strike committee'—a situation compared favourably with that at Dagenham and Halewood.<sup>507</sup> The Claimants Union, reportedly, supported striking Ford workers and encouraged them to make demands for social security payments collectively. An announcement in the same piece informed readers of an opportunity to meet with CU activists at Leys Hall in Dagenham later that day.

As was previously the case in the 1971 strike, social security claims by striking workers became a point of contention during this dispute. The week after the initial walkout the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) called Ron Todd's Personal Assistant at the TGWU, proposing to set up liaison facilities to address any issues that arose. While the same proposal was also put to the AUEW, neither organisation responded to the offer.<sup>508</sup> The official response of the unions

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<sup>506</sup> 'Why We're Backing Our Men in the Strike', *Ford Strike News* (London, 26 October 1978), No. 5.

<sup>507</sup> 'SS', *Ford Strike News* (London, [26 October 1978]), No. 5, p. 2.

<sup>508</sup> London, National Archives, AST36/1346 Trade Disputes Ford 1978, 'Memo: Ford Strike', 27 September 1978; 'The Ford Strike' [No Date].

representing Ford's workforce to the issue of social security payments remained muted throughout the strike.

Later that week, even before any of the unions involved made the strike official, the Civil and Public Services Association (CPSA), the main body representing civil servants, pledged support for the industrial action.<sup>509</sup> What this meant in practice remained unclear at first, as one DHSS official observed to the Minister for Social Security's Private Secretary. The situation still caused sufficient concern in Whitehall, to merit ongoing monitoring, including the collation of material issued by an East London CPSA branch, the FWC and the Claimants Union.

The DHSS administered social security applications arising from the strike differently across the country. In regions covering some plants, such as Halewood and Langley, strikers attended interviews at special centres temporarily established to meet the extra volume of claims. Elsewhere, most notably in Dagenham, applications were dealt with remotely by post and telephone.<sup>510</sup> This inconsistency led to the clearest instance of CPSA members putting their union's support for the strike into practice.

A number of single strikers managed to secure some payments with the support of shop stewards in Langley, while the Claimants Union linked up with workers in Dagenham before the end of October.<sup>511</sup> Then the FWC and an East London branch of the CPSA jointly lobbied the regional headquarters of the DHSS on 3 November. Together, they issued a leaflet to demand that strikers in Dagenham also have access to a strike centre for claiming benefits, ending with a reminder to the public sector workers who received a copy as they entered the building: 'Remember the CPSA supports the Ford workers as part of our own pay

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<sup>509</sup> Christopher Thomas, 'Ford Strikers Say They Will Not Bargain While 5% Curb Stands', *The Times* (London, 30 September 1978), p. 17.

<sup>510</sup> London, National Archives, AST36/1346 Trade Disputes Ford 1978, 'Ford Strike: Regional Arrangements', [c. 3 October 1978].

<sup>511</sup> 'SS'.

campaign, the least that we can do is see that they receive their full legal entitlement'.<sup>512</sup> Ford Workers began to forge an unlikely alliance between s Union activists and DHSS employees. After all, CU literature generally depicted 'SS' staff as little Hitlers complete with toothbrush moustaches and military uniform.

Later that day the Minister for Social Security's Private Secretary received another briefing from a colleague on 'elements of the CPSA who are in close touch with local Claimants Unions and Ford shops stewards'. Anticipating the 'Ford workers, Claimants Unions and other activists who would make interviewing difficult by creating arguments and tensions', the author counselled Ministers against meeting their demand.<sup>513</sup>

This senior civil servant identified the Ford workers behind this action as shop stewards, which may well have been the case in practice. Afterwards the Combine criticised the Dagenham Strike Committee, a body of senior stewards and convenors set up to coordinate the strike, for a failure of leadership on the issue. *Ford Strike News* reported that 'workers took matters into their own hands and occupied the East Ham Social Security Office for two hours' on 9 November 'in support of the right of one of them to work there', collective action as practiced by the Claimants Union.<sup>514</sup> The piece ended with an invitation for workers to meet in the PTA Plant's car park to take part in other similar actions. Stewards or not, those involved organised such actions independently of the union, both in terms of officials and the leading lay representatives.

Over the course of the strike more than a quarter of those involved successfully claimed a total of £1,270,657 in supplementary benefits for their dependants. By contrast, at most fourteen single strikers made successful claims

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<sup>512</sup> London, National Archives, AST36/1346, Ford Group (Combine) and Waltham Forest CPSA (DHSS), 'Why We Are Here', 3 November 1978.

<sup>513</sup> London, National Archives, AST36/1346, Letter from N Hanson to Mr Magee dated 3 November 1978.

<sup>514</sup> 'Dagenham Social Security Scandal', *Ford Strike News* (London, 16 November 1978), 8 edition, p. 2.

for their own urgent needs worth a mere £254.<sup>515</sup> As happened before in 1971, social security payments generally reduced pressure to resume work for those whose wages also supported other household members. Moreover, the attention senior civil servants paid to these interventions also suggested that they had a wider impact, beyond their financial effect. The political coalition that members of Ford's workforce began to develop with public sector workers and activists from the Claimants Union certainly raised concerns in Whitehall at the time. Likewise, any concessions achieved through collective action also served as propaganda for the self-organised approach advocated by the Combine and the CU alike.

Formal negotiations resumed four weeks into the strike after Reg Birch wrote to Sir Terence Beckett on Thursday 19 October, urging him 'to discover a way through what can only be described as a ghastly mess'.<sup>516</sup> The Combine condemned this approach, arguing that the press widely interpreted it as a sign of weakness '*ON OUR SIDE*'. The following Monday Beckett held further secret talks with Birch, Ron Todd and another official Doug Cornwall. When this came out at a meeting of the union side of the FNJNC that Wednesday, other union representatives made 'strong criticisms of Reg Birch's decision to approach the company without [...] authority'.<sup>517</sup> Shop stewards from Dagenham also responded with a resolution that any further meetings with management should be attended by the full FNJNC. Meanwhile, the Combine organised a mass lobby of the talks when they resumed at Ford's West London offices in Moscow Place that Friday.

These continued until the following Tuesday evening when negotiators agreed to put a proposed deal to the workforce. Management presented this as 'the

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<sup>515</sup> London, National Archives, AST 36/1346 Trade Disputes Ford 1978, 'Ford Strike' [No Date].

<sup>516</sup> Alan Pike, 'Ford Union Chief Calls for More Negotiations', *Financial Times* (London, 20 October 1978), p. 1.

<sup>517</sup> 'We've Never Been in a Stronger Position', *Ford Strike News*, [26 October 1978], No. 5, p. 1.

company's final offer', predictably enough.<sup>518</sup> It included increasing the basic rate of pay by at least £5.92, a percentage increase of over nine per cent. This was supplemented by an additional 'attendance allowance', which could be withdrawn for breach of any one of nine criteria. These included participation in industrial action, late attendance, disciplinary issues and lay-offs due to internal disputes. In principle, this raised wages by at least an additional £3.20, amounting to a total pay rise of over fourteen per cent.

The response of union negotiators to the deal was inconsistent. While claiming to have rejected the offer, they agreed that the matter should be put to a vote of the workforce at mass meetings later that week. Ron Todd, chairman of Union side of the FNJNC, saw the inclusion of penalty clauses as 'the main stumbling block', distancing himself from what was on the table.<sup>519</sup>

The next day a report in the *Morning Star* celebrated the offer as 'shatter[ing] the government's 5 per cent pay limit by more than 200 per cent'. While this exaggerated the point by overlooking how the attendance allowance effectively operated as a productivity deal, the assessment of the offer's impact on government policy proved accurate. The author also noted that 'it may well not satisfy the 57,000 Ford workers now in the sixth week of the strike', since the offer made no concession on working hours and it still fell well short of the demand for twenty pound without strings.<sup>520</sup>

By contrast a front-page headline in the next issue of *Ford Strike News* unambiguously called on workers to 'Reject This First "Final Offer"', making the Combine's position clear. A photomontage appeared alongside the text, depicting a man dressed in a suit with a giant carrot in his arms, an image culled from an

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<sup>518</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Motor Company Limited 'Ford Employee Information', 31 October 1978.

<sup>519</sup> Philip Bassett and Christian Tyler, 'Ford 14.9% Pay Offer Rejected by Unions', *Financial Times* (London, 1 November 1978), p. 1 (p. 9).

<sup>520</sup> Charlie Brewster, 'Ford Lifts Offer to 14.9 Per Cent', *Morning Star* (London, 1 November 1978), p. 1.

advertisement for executive pensions. In its original context, this depicted the challenge of providing senior managers with financial incentives that minimised tax liability.<sup>521</sup>

The disparate uses of this image exemplified the meaning of the Situationist terms *récupération* and *détournement*. First the advertising industry recuperated the aesthetics of Dadaism and Surrealism, co-opting an avant-garde style of photomontage to market financial services. This advertisement then underwent a *détournement*, subverting its previous use for radical political ends. In both contexts a besuited character represented senior management. A pair of cartoon eyes with an evil expression and a mouthful of sharply pointed teeth transformed the overgrown root vegetable from a symbol for executive benefits into ‘the carrot that bites back’, an attack on workers disguised as an incentive package. Another modification saw a speech bubble emerge from the manager’s mouth. ‘They are bound to accept this at a mass meeting’, it announced, implicitly voicing the Combine’s challenge to their workmates to defy this expectation.<sup>522</sup>

Mass meetings of workers at every Ford plant apart from Swansea overwhelmingly voted against accepting the deal. The same day Ford announced plans to lay-off workers from a German plant in Saarlouis. Transnational integration across Europe left operations elsewhere increasingly vulnerable to the effects of industrial action in Britain.<sup>523</sup>

Following this setback, negotiations resumed again on 20 November, when management were able to announce that union negotiators recommended acceptance of an offer. This deal remained essentially the same as the one rejected by workers three weeks earlier, with no further cash on the table. The only

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<sup>521</sup> ‘An Incentive to All Directors Earning over £25,000’, *Financial Times* (London, 28 September 1978), section Survey, p. 15.

<sup>522</sup> ‘Reject This First “Final Offer”’, *Ford Strike News*, 2 October 1978, [No. 6] edition, p. [1].

<sup>523</sup> Philip Bassett and Arthur Smith, ‘Ford Strikers Reject “Final” Pay Offer’, *Financial Times* (London, 4 November 1978), p. 1.

concessions management made were to bring a new holiday pay scheme forward by four months and to limit the conditions for attendance payments, which were also rebranded as 'supplementary payments'.<sup>524</sup>

Ron Todd described the deal as a 'significant improvement in the previous offer', a claim published without critical comment in the *Morning Star*. According to the same source, trade union representatives reached agreement by a majority of almost 3 to 1, voting 33 to 12 in favour of the offer.<sup>525</sup> *Ford Strike News* tried to rebut this claim, arguing that there was a much narrower margin, just 24 to 19, with the vote causing divisions between union officials and senior stewards. Singling Todd out for personal criticism, the same piece noted scathingly the similarity between the deal, which now met with his approval, and the one he described as a 'recipe for disaster' just three weeks earlier. The bulletin went on to emphasise the wider political significance of the dispute:

Fords backed by the Government and the CBI [Confederation for British Industry] have been stonewalling for the last 3 weeks. Faced with this political pressure the trade union leaders have lost heart. Our strike has always been against the Government and pay restraint, and yet the union leaders have tried to prevent other workers coming out alongside us.<sup>526</sup>

Their workmates were urged to reject the offer, a position also taken by shop stewards committees from plants in Halewood, Langley and Croydon, but not Dagenham.

When mass meetings took place in all of Ford's plants except Langley on 22 November, most workers decided to accept the offer, bringing the strike to an end.

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<sup>524</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Motor Company Limited, *Ford Employee Information*, 20 November 1978.

<sup>525</sup> Charlie Brewster, 'Ford Unions Accept 17%', *Morning Star* (London, 21 November 1978), p. 1.

<sup>526</sup> Personal Collection, *No Surrender*, Ford Strike News, No. 9 [c. 21 November 1978], p. 1.

Despite a 'convincing vote for a return to work', the *Financial Times* reported 'criticism at mass meetings of the penalty clauses in the supplementary payment scheme', identifying this as a source of future friction.<sup>527</sup> The dispute cost the firm an estimated 117,000 vehicles in lost production worth £450,000,000. Its resolution dealt a major blow to the government's incomes policy, with British Oxygen already about to settle another strike with a pay offer in breach of the 5% limits and more to follow.

### **Make the Union Serve the Interests of the Workers, the Aftermath**

After nine weeks the strike came to an end, having lasted almost as long as the 1971 pay dispute. While the vote to return to work went against the Combine's recommendation, this was hardly surprising given the length of the dispute and the less robust stance adopted by official union negotiators. None of this should detract from the role these shop-floor militants played in organising industrial action from the outset. While they did not achieve everything they set out to, the government incomes policies came under a severe attack, encouraging others to make the fatal blow.

Afterwards Members of the Combine met again to debrief in Coventry on 17 December. Reports from plants across the country described management's reluctance to provoke conflict since the return to work. Minutes of the meeting recorded the prevailing view of the pay dispute's outcome. 'The general feeling about the strike was that it was no victory – because we could have done much better – and it was no defeat, because we smashed through the 5%.' Expenditure of £1,300 was accounted for, mainly for printing and distributing *Ford Strike News*, with costs covered by the sale of t-shirts and badges, and donations. The meeting

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<sup>527</sup> Alan Pike, 'Ford Strikers Back Tomorrow after Accepting 17% Deal', *Financial Times* (London, 23 November 1978), p. 1.

decided to form ‘a mass organisation of Ford workers and their wives and husbands’, building on the credibility established during the dispute. Discussions about drafting a constitution covered a range of issues: unemployment and a reduced working week, the need for action and whether the Combine should be an explicitly socialist organisation. An initial decision was taken to exclude racists, while ‘a long discussion on whether the Constitution should include a point about sexism’ also took place.<sup>528</sup>

That agreement was reached so quickly to take such a firm position on racism, but not sexism, reflected the composition of the company’s workforce, which while ethnically diverse was overwhelmingly made up of men. For the Combine, an organisation mainly composed of semi-skilled mass workers—the section of the workforce generally accessible to Black workers—opposing racism clearly served to maintain collective unity. On the other hand, issues to do with sexual inequality played out inside workers’ households as much as they did within the factory. Given the role that stereotypes of masculinity played in the wider culture of the car industry, the amount of time spent discussing the issue of sexism might seem more remarkable than any failure to reach quick agreement on how to address the issue.

A draft constitution proposed to define the first of the Combine’s aims and objectives as ‘[t]o build a rank and file organisation to develop the power, organisation, confidence and strength of Ford workers – and to make the union serve the interests of the workers’.<sup>529</sup> As seen already in the first FWC leaflet, the implication that workers needed such an independent organisation to ensure the unions represented their interests effectively displayed ambivalence towards trade unionism. The text went on to suggest that members should be ‘strongly encouraged to regularly attend union branch meetings’ and tasked Combine

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<sup>529</sup> Personal Collection, [Alan Hayling], ‘Draft Constitution’, [1978].

branches with developing 'tactics and plans within local union branches and shop stewards' committees'. Such trade-union activity only constituted one aspect of a broader strategy for how to 'organise to win' within the firm. Emphasis was also placed on 'support and solidarity [...] for any group of workers fighting over an issue with which the "Combine" agrees'. All this signalled the continued relevance of the politics of working-class autonomy. Yet the document's draft status also suggested a lack of consensus on these issues among industrial militants, whose perspectives reflected the sectarian divisions of left-wing politics in Britain.

This posed a challenge to the militants as recalled in interview by Rod Finlayson, an active Combine member from its inception who worked in the Dagenham Foundry until its closure when he moved on to the PTA plant. Finlayson described himself as 'a Maoist-Stalinist who ended up a Stalinist', words spoken with a broad smile but without a trace of irony. Instead, his expression conveyed a sharp-witted pleasure in taking such a provocative stance, which was tempered by a disarming warmth and sincerity in his commitment to fighting social injustice. Given Finlayson's political trajectory, his recollections of how the Combine dealt with Leninist parties were all the more striking:

At one point I brought a leading bloke from the organisation I was in and then somebody else brought someone from SWP. And we had to ban [both of] them because all they did was create splits. And you can't have workers' unity and splits at the same time.<sup>530</sup>

For the Combine to organise effectively, it had to engage as many militants at Ford as was practicable. Alongside those with no party political affiliations and Labour Party members, these included the cadre of the full panoply of far-left organisations in Britain. More often than not, this entailed adherence to Leninist politics of one form or another at the time. To overcome the sectarian divisions that plagued the

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<sup>530</sup> Rod Finlayson, Interview, 2015.

left, however, the Combine needed to organise independently from such outside influences.

Finlayson reiterated the point with reference to another occasion when relations deteriorated with the SWP, which had previously printed material for the campaign. He recalled how the Combine then turned to anarchist printers. Such a move was only possible because of the non-sectarian approach of those who initiated the Combine. Given the tensions between Finlayson's professed politics and such practices, it seems appropriate to give him the last word: 'You can work with people and you build up trust and you build up solidarity and then people will perhaps consider your views, or perhaps not'.<sup>531</sup>

Early in the New Year Alan Hayling wrote to Jan Cartier of the Ford Amsterdam Workers' Commission to thank him for solidarity shown during the national pay strike. Hayling specifically mentioned how information sent from the Netherlands during the strike gave the Combine greater credibility. Likewise, a message of support that accompanied a donation to the Langley strike fund from their Dutch workmates made reference to FWC member Alex Gungi. This led the plant's Shop Stewards Committee to allocate one hundred pounds from the donation to the Combine. Hayling then went on to discuss the possibility of an international meeting of the firm's workforce:

I think a Ford Europe conference on the 35 hour week would be a great idea. At least it would put our Convenors on the spot. It would be even better if it was organised in such a way as to get rank and file participation. (eg a conference in which a factory of a certain size would send its convenor, plus a specified number of stewards, and a specified number of ordinary rank and file workers). Of course the call for this conference would have to come

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<sup>531</sup> Op. Cit.

from an official Ford Trade Union organisation in one country or another. Any thoughts on this??<sup>532</sup>

Cartier and Hayling made contact due to the Combine's role in the strike and the solidarity shown by their Dutch workmates. Within two months the two men began to hatch plans to bring together shop-floor worker from across Ford's European operations.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

In preparation for the 1978 wage claim Big Flame and others from a broad tendency that advocated the politics of working-class autonomy initiated a new national organisation the Ford Workers Group ("The Combine"). While many of those involved were shop stewards holding a broader range of political views, collectively they identified themselves as ordinary workers and organised independently of both the unions and any political parties. The Combine then ran an unprecedented shop-floor campaign inside both the factory and the unions, which began before negotiations started and carried on after the final vote to resume work.

The strike was a watershed moment for relations between the company and the British state too. Over the previous decade, whichever of the two main parties was in government, the agenda of the state and Ford management generally aligned over how to manage the crisis in the post-war settlement. As the company's need to recruit labour came into conflict with the Social Contract this consensus broke down. The terms under which British social democracy and Ford's subsidiary had thrived symbiotically no longer applied.

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<sup>532</sup> Personal Collection, Letter from Alan Hayling to Jan Cartier, 12 January 1979.

## **6. There is No Alternative, 1979 to 1990**

It goes without saying that Margaret Thatcher's election as Prime Minister marked a major turning point for the country, just as the 1978 Ford national pay strike had done for the subsidiary six months earlier. In Britain the origins of this transition can be traced back through the IMF crisis to the radical free-market policy proposals of the Conservative 1970 general election manifesto. Internationally, American abandonment of the Bretton Woods system under Richard Nixon and the role of the Chicago Boys in developing monetarist economic policies for the Chilean Junta also set the scene for such a shift. Yet, Thatcher's rise to power and the election of her ally Ronald Reagan the following year represented a fundamental shift in how the capitalist state responded to a systemic crisis that had by then been ongoing for well over a decade.

In this new climate and with Ford's operations in Britain going further into decline, unrest at the firm would never again have the same political impact. The 1978 strike saw imports of Ford cars exceed exports for the first time since domestic production began. This marked the beginning of a trend. The size of the workforce peaked the following year. Having been extolled for years as the country's main exporter, the firm became the source of a net loss to the balance of trade worth £164,000,000 in 1980. The British share of European output also continued to fall. While Ford Werke in Germany consolidated its position as the largest operation in Europe, output in Spain started to match that in Britain by 1984. In the circumstances, the British subsidiary reported remarkably strong profits throughout the 1980s, even exceeding previous records on two occasions.<sup>533</sup> This combination of rising profits with declining production signalled a shift in corporate policy away from reinvesting earnings back into British manufacturing facilities.

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<sup>533</sup> Tolliday, 'Statistical Appendix', II, pp. 141–47.

A drive to restructure the process of production inside the factory accompanied such changes to the corporation's trans-European structure. Following the 1979 visit of Ford of Europe Vice-President Manufacturing Bill Hayden to Japan, management made a series of attempts to remodel operations based on Japanese management techniques.<sup>534</sup> Implementation of such an approach would remain a point of contention with members of the workforce for years to come. Nevertheless, Ford, the company that had become eponymous with the paradigm for mid-twentieth-century manufacturing, began to look for an alternative model. This came about amid an ongoing international structural crisis in an automobile sector with excess capacity. Operations across Europe felt the effect of this particularly acutely, since investment had been concentrated there since the Second World War.<sup>535</sup> Both economically and symbolically, the sector became increasingly displaced from its central position. The automobile industry in Britain and its workforce were further undermined by the specific deindustrialisation policies adopted by the new Conservative administration.

These accelerated a general secular trend towards lower employment, if not output, in manufacturing across the developed world from the 1950s onwards. Amplifying this tendency, British industry also underwent a relative decline throughout the long twentieth century from a previous hegemonic position within the world economy. While situating developments within this context, the economic and social historian Jim Tomlinson underscored the abrupt nature of this transition: 'De-industrialization reached a crescendo in 1979-82, when a grossly overvalued exchange rate rendered large swathes of British industry

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<sup>534</sup> Tolliday, 'The Decline of Ford', II, pp. 99–101.

<sup>535</sup> Beverly J. Silver, *Force of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 49–54 & 171.

uncompetitive, and industrial output fell by 20 per cent.<sup>536</sup> Both the extent and pace of change were exceptional by comparison with other developed countries.

Tomlinson analysis serves to undermine 'declinist narratives' of twentieth-century British history in general, not just those depicting this specific moment as one of economic renewal. What is absent from his otherwise compelling structural analysis, however, is a sense that this process had any connection to the industrial and social unrest of the previous decade. Tomlinson's reluctance to rely on 'contemporary, highly politicized and polemical discourses' highlights some of the challenges entailed in engaging critically with such sources. While such concerns should not be dismissed lightly, exactly this question of the relationship between workers' agency and structural change that was then ongoing preoccupied those advocating the politics of working-class autonomy at the time.

In 1979 *Red Notes*, which was linked to Ford through the activities of its publisher Ed Emery as an external militant in Dagenham, brought out *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis*. This document was published in support of the April 7 Defence Committee, an international solidarity campaign for Italian political prisoners arrested in a wave of repression in the wake of the Moro affair. At the time this text represented the most significant collection of material translated into English from the Italian movement to date.

The editorial selection draws out a chain of continuity between contemporary autonomist Marxism and earlier Italian workerism. The opening articles introduced English readers to two key texts from *operaismo* written by Mario Tronti in the mid-1960s. In the first of these 'Lenin in England', Tronti emphasised the role of working-class struggle as a driver of capitalist development.

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<sup>536</sup> Jim Tomlinson, 'De-Industrialization Not Decline: A New Meta-Narrative for Post-War British History', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27.1 (2016), 76–99 (p. 87). For an overview of worldwide capitalist development over the *longue durée*, see also Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

In the other 'The Strategy of Refusal', he identified the refusal of work as a politically strategic moment in which workers took action for themselves, relegating the party to a tactical role.<sup>537</sup> These texts are indeed 'highly politicized and polemical in tone', providing a perspective that is far from detached in its analysis.

The same goes for the other material translated, which originally came out in Italian after these two texts, including several pieces by a prominent figure among the defendants Antonio Negri. In the first of these Negri linked the shift in public policy away from social democratic reform towards restructuring to a change of state-form from the 'state-as-planner' to the 'state-as-enterprise', a transition he identified as early as 1973.<sup>538</sup> An interview with Negri, an extract of which was also included, *Dall'operaio Massa All'Operaio Sociale* (translated as 'Notes on the "Social" Worker'), suggested another transition with the recomposition of labour away from the mass worker towards a more diffuse form of working-class subjectivity.<sup>539</sup>

Given the strategic implications of such analysis in terms for the relative insignificance of future unrest in the automobile sector, it is perhaps to the credit of those involved that they did not abandon this terrain altogether. Yet, agitating and organisational activity at Ford informed by the politics of working-class autonomy declined dramatically over the course of the 1980s, reflecting the underlying changes in social conditions that such analysis set out to address. While Ford

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<sup>537</sup> Tronti, 'Lenin in England'; Tronti, 'Lenin in Inghilterra'; Tronti, 'The Strategy of Refusal'; Tronti, *Operai e capitale*, pp. 234–52.

<sup>538</sup> Negri, 'Reformism and Restructuration'. The original was published as the first appendix to Negri, Antonio, 'Partito operaio contro il lavoro', in *Crisi e organizzazione operaia*, by Sergio Bologna, Paolo Carpignano, and Antonio Negri, *I fatti e le idee Saggi e Biografie*, 279 (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1974), pp. 99–193 (pp. 161–65).

<sup>539</sup> Antonio Negri, 'Note on the "Social" Worker', in *Working Class Autonomy and the Crisis*, ed. by Red Notes, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London: Red Notes, 1979), pp. 37–38; Antonio Negri, *Dall'operaio massa all'operaio social: Intervista sull'operaismo*, ed. by Paolo Pozzi and Roberta Tommasini (Milano: Multhipla, 1979).

workers continued to organise at work afterwards, both the efficacy and broader political significance of such activity diminished.

In response to a cycle of heightened social and industrial unrest, a radical transformation at the level of the state ushered in the restructuring of the British motor industry, the same situation Negri grappled with in Italy. Just as shop-floor militants at Ford began attempts to organise transnationally across Europe, the political and industrial landscape became much less favourable. The rest of this chapter charts this process across three main sections. The first examines the situation in British Ford plants during Margaret Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister between 1979 and 1983. The second charts developments at a European level, examining the history of the European Ford Workers Combine (EFCW). The third section returns to the situation in Britain during Thatcher's second and brief third terms as Prime Minister, ending in 1990.

### **After Japan, 1979 to 1983**

Within two weeks of the 1979 general election, 'the Ford Workers Group ("The Combine")' held a national meeting on 19 May 1979. This was the second such gathering since the previous year's strike. By then the Combine drew support from ten plants across the country. The agenda covered the challenge of how to mount 'a sustained campaign on the issues facing us—pay, the 35-hour week, victimisation, racism, automation and redundancies'. 'Don't leave it to someone else—or nothing will change'—they urged their workmates afterwards, encouraging them to get involved if they shared the group's aims:

'More money and less work [[]] Forcing the union to fight for the interests of its members [[]] Against racism and discrimination against women',<sup>540</sup>

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<sup>540</sup> 'Combine National Meeting', *Fraud News* (London, July 1979), p. 5.

The piece then ended by providing contact details for the Combine in a flat on a South-London council estate and at another address on Whitechapel, Liverpool.

The following month another issue of *Fraud News* came out. Articles covered a wide range of topics, such as the police killing of Blair Peach at an anti-racism demonstration, reports from plants across the country, industrial action by Danish workmates and a hunger strike at Ford Spain. The main focus fell on that year's pay claim though. The Combine proposed a clear set of demands: a twenty-five per cent pay increase, bringing the minimum basic rate to one hundred pound a week; index linking of wages to inflation; a thirty-five-hour working week; and the abolition of pay supplements and other penalty clauses. Following the Combine's effective intervention at the previous Coventry Shop Stewards Conference, however, union leaders planned to cancel it this year. This raised concerns about how to exert shop-floor power over negotiations. The exclusion of any shop-floor involvement in pay negotiations by union officials would continue throughout the 1980s.<sup>541</sup>

Another piece in the same issue explored the implications for car workers of the rapid fall in the cost of microprocessors. One early indication of the impact of such technology on the automobile industry came from Italy, where Fiat led the European car industry in terms of the introduction of robotics. That year a trial of new robots also began at Halewood. *Fraud News* argued that this situation required a specific response: 'What needs to be challenged is not technology, but the control over technology by managements committed to profit-making at our expense.'<sup>542</sup> A new phase in automation suggested another phase in the technical recomposition of labour as occurred with the introduction of the assembly line six decades earlier. The potential to increase productivity threatened widespread redundancies, given the current capacity of the European automobile sector.

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<sup>541</sup> 'It's Got to Be £100!', *Fraud News* (London, July 1979), p. 1.

<sup>542</sup> 'The Chips That Bite Back', *Fraud News* (London, July 1979), p. 3.

This situation coincided with the Ford executive Bill Hayden's visit to Japan, which marked the beginning of management attempts to restructure European operations modelled on the Japanese car industry. First the *After Japan* programme and then the *Employee Involvement* programme both emphasised the rigid labour discipline and the more flexible working practices associated with Japanese management techniques.<sup>543</sup> This restructuring also entailed a transition towards just-in-time supply chain management, facilitated by new computer technology.

That July Alan Hayling and Ed Emery hosted another national meeting of the Combine in Epping Forrest, an area of ancient woodland situated along the north east fringe of Greater London.<sup>544</sup> While such a sylvan setting might seem an incongruous location for industrial militants to strategise how best to organise in an increasingly high-tech workplace, the agenda covered more familiar territory. The talks covered finance, *Fraud News*, plant reports, and the upcoming pay claim.

While a draft constitution was also circulated beforehand, discussion never reached this final item on the agenda. This suggested that tackling more practical issues took priority over trying to agree on a formal structure, which perhaps risked highlighting internal disagreements. In any case, the text indicated some of the different views within the Combine.

This was a composite of two earlier proposals from the previous national meeting, one by Hayling and another by someone only identified by his first name Jim. The new version of the text differed significantly from Hayling's original. It defined the Combine as 'an organisation of rank and file trade unionists', rather than workers whose trade-union status only came up previously to refute any suggestion otherwise. Rather than asserting their independence from the unions as a group of 'ordinary workers', the Combine's role became that of 'building a fighting

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<sup>543</sup> Tolliday, 'The Decline of Ford', II, pp. 99–101.

<sup>544</sup> Personal collection, '[Agenda of the] Ford Workers Group ("The Combine")', 23 July 1979.

stewards movement', albeit one that 'fully involves the rank and file in all union activities'.<sup>545</sup> To some extent, this offered a realistic assessment of the available alternatives, but such a rhetorical shift reflected the political makeup of the Combine too. As on the British left in general, Big Flame's purely tactical commitment to trade unionism represented a marginal point of view at one end of a political spectrum. Even on the far left, the orthodox Leninist distinction between the reformist economic role of trade unions and the revolutionary political role of the party prevailed.

Other signs still remained of an autonomist outlook with the Combine described as a 'socialist organisation', but one 'not allied to any particular party or group'. Likewise, the commitment of members to take action took priority over their identification with socialist politics. Membership rights also still extended to 'Ford workers and their wives/girlfriends or husbands/boyfriends', who were not necessarily union members in their own rights.<sup>546</sup> Most importantly, the Combine continued to organise independently of both union officials and the formal leadership of senior shop stewards and convenors.

Before the union had submitted that year's pay claim, a Combine leaflet produced in Langley challenged union leaders for refusing to allow any shop-floor involvement in the formulation of demands. 'They don't want a repeat of last year', the authors noted caustically, 'when there was a real shop floor campaign with thousands of badges and leaflets'. Readers were urged to hold union representatives to a motion that had been passed by the branch, resolving that any final decision on the claim should be made at mass meetings. The text went on to

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid; Personal Collection, [Alan Hayling], 'Draft Constitution', [1978].

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

argue that ‘we want – more money, index linked wages, shorter hours, more holidays, better pension’, five clear priorities.<sup>547</sup>

Significantly, the official claim raised exactly the same points in precisely the same order when it came out. It also included an ambitious demand for a thirty-pound increase in the basic rate of weekly pay. The conciseness of this document, which only took up a single sheet of A4 paper, stood in marked contrast with the lengthy pamphlets issued over the past decade. The unions framed demands in terms of workers needs instead of lengthy technical arguments about the company’s ability to pay. On paper at least, the Combine’s impact was clear to see.<sup>548</sup>

This left little choice but to acknowledge the claim as ‘a good one’ in terms of its content. Concerns remained about the union decision to cancel the Shop Stewards Conference though, which was rightly seen as a sign of hostility towards any shop-floor involvement in negotiations. Both management and the press had access to the claim before it was made available to union members. This raised doubts that the militant posture adopted by union leaders in fact served to deflect attention from their real attitude towards industrial action, by deliberately calling a strike without building rank-and-file support. ‘Don’t Decide before Yuletide’, the Combine’s slogan, instead urged workers to avoid either accepting a deal or embarking on a long strike until after the New Year. As well as calling for a mass lobby of the talks, a variety of other tactics were suggested: ‘work to rule, overtime ban, taking Friday nights out and generally relaxing’.<sup>549</sup>

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<sup>547</sup> Personal Collection, [Ford Workers Combine], ‘Wage Claim Latest’, [September 1979].

<sup>548</sup> Personal Collection, Ron Todd and Jack Whyman on behalf of the Ford National Joint Negotiation Committee (Trade Union Side), ‘Ford Claim—What We Want and What Ford Needs’, [1979].

<sup>549</sup> ‘How to Win the 1979 Wage Claim: Don’t Settle before Xmas’, *Fraud News: Bulletin of the Ford Workers Group “The Combine”*, [November 1979], p.1.

Management then tabled an offer that was purportedly ‘the largest cash increase in wage rates ever offered in response to the Unions’ annual wage claim’, raising basic weekly pay by a minimum of £11.25.<sup>550</sup> While negotiations took place without government imposed wage restraints for the first time in recent years, such a grandiose claim did not reveal the full picture. In fact, the offer failed to keep up with an exceptionally high rate of inflation even by the standards of the 1970s, reaching seventeen per cent in Thatcher’s first year in office. Yet, the approach adopted by union negotiators combined with the mood on the shop floor led to this offer’s acceptance without industrial action.

The first major strike to confront the Thatcher administration instead took place in the steel industry, although this dispute saw secondary action take place at Ford. This began when the Dagenham Engine Plant Convenor decided to ‘black’ all steel for three days. Doing so threatened major disruption at the car firm, before TGWU officials ordered an end to the action. Two months later the union executive reversed this position, instructing members to ‘positively observe all steel pickets’. Steelworkers from Warrington then sent a flying picket to Dagenham, which the Combine supported with 12,000 leaflets calling on their workmates to show solidarity. According to Big Flame, an Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) official attended the scene and told his own members to ‘fuck off’, claiming that the Ford unions had the matter in hand. In spite of this obstructive intervention, the unofficial blockade resumed again briefly before ISTC replaced it with a purely symbolic ‘token picket’.<sup>551</sup> Union officials actively prevented industrial action from taking full effect in what was widely seen as potentially a major political challenge to the new government.

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<sup>550</sup> Personal Collection, Employee Relations Staff of the Ford Motor Company Limited, *Ford Employee Information*, 16 November 1979.

<sup>551</sup> ‘Ford Workers Held Back’, *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (London, April 1980), p. 3.

Meanwhile, the existing leadership of the Ford shop stewards organisation continued to encounter pressure from below. The 1980 Langley TGWU branch elections saw ‘a battle between the Ford Workers Group (“The Combine”) and self-proclaimed “moderates”’, who had dominated the plant’s union branch for more than a decade.<sup>552</sup> At a general meeting to elect new representatives, a district official declared the result of a show of hands null and void, putting the matter to a secret ballot instead. Proceedings then descended into chaos with furniture smashed and people physically ejected off the stage. The incident only came to a conclusion with the arrival of a police officer, riding a bicycle and ringing his bell. Such an ending was more reminiscent of an Ealing Comedy than *Finally got the News*, a hard-hitting documentary about the struggle of Black workers in the Detroit automobile industry, which the Combine screened at a fundraising event. Although the intensity of the conflict was not the same, both situations saw workers organising independently of the union in response to an institutional failure to represent their needs.<sup>553</sup>

The following year Ford workers voted ‘overwhelmingly’ in favour of another pay offer, although it represented ‘a big cut in [...] living standards’, failing yet again to keep up with inflation. Discussing the situation in *Big Flame* under a pseudonym, Alan Hayling described the reluctance of most workers to take action despite efforts to persuade them otherwise. This stemmed, the Secretary of the UK Ford Workers Combine suggested, from a shared sense that ‘no one section [of the workforce] on its own will have the power to knock out this government’, emphasising the political character of such a confrontation. While all remained quite on the pay front, he still foresaw a ‘hot year at Ford’s’ ahead. Indeed, management attempts to assert authority on the shop floor, using ‘efficiency

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<sup>552</sup> Ford Langley Worker, ‘Fist Fights at Langley’, *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (London, February 1980), p. 2.

<sup>553</sup> Stewart Bird, Peter Gessner, and Rene Lichtman, *Finally Got the News* (Icarus Films, 1970).

clauses' and a new 'disciplinary code', had already met with opposition in Halewood.<sup>554</sup>

Hayling's prediction proved well founded. With the introduction of new technology on Merseyside, management attempted to impose a new disciplinary regime, which became known as the '3<sup>rd</sup> Riot Act' within the plant. This provoked a two-week unofficial strike, which forced the company to abandon the policy. While national pay disputes were avoided, Ford workers continued to resist restructuring of the process of production through unofficial action.<sup>555</sup>

That year saw transport workers at Ford take such steps, providing another indication of the state of trade-union representation at the firm. The roots of this dispute dated back to July 1980 when five regular weekly deliveries of parts from Genk under the 'Cortina Support Programme' came to an end. At that time shop stewards followed official procedures to secure an agreement from management that any future deliveries of parts from the Belgian plant would be allocated to Ford employees. When such work resumed the following January, external contractors instead delivered the parts. This provoked a picket, which a panel of union officials and convenors initially refused to support, even though the company had breached the terms of an existing agreement.<sup>556</sup>

In response, Ford laid off thousands of other workers from plants across the country. The company then sent a letter on 30 January to those effected that emphasised the unofficial status of the dispute: 'Management and the Unions are doing their best to get a resumption of normal work'.<sup>557</sup> The union position only shifted in favour of industrial action after the picket had been temporarily lifted to

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<sup>554</sup> Jack Brown, 'Peace at Fords?', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame* (London, February 1981), p. 5.

<sup>555</sup> Darlington, pp. 203–4.

<sup>556</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Truck Drivers, 'The Drivers' Case', 29 January 1981.

<sup>557</sup> Personal Collection, Letter to Employees from Langley Plant Manager P. J. Sissions, 30 January 1981.

allow for negotiations, in which management made no concessions. Meanwhile, the Combine encouraged their workmates to 'support the drivers', framing the issue in terms of the need to defend jobs and 'fight unpaid layoffs'.<sup>558</sup>

Even after an agreement acceptable to the drivers was reached, unofficial action still carried on in support of eight employees of the haulier firm Silcock and Collier, who faced dismissal for refusing to cross the Ford workers' picket line. Attempts to break the strike led to angry confrontations, which saw one driver arrested for the alleged possession of a weapon, although the charges were later dropped. Although Ron Todd gave a television interview and the union side of the FNJNC issuing a statement, both of which distanced the unions from the dispute, the drivers did not return to work until 15 February. As a result, all of the contractor's drivers were formally reinstated.<sup>559</sup>

This dispute coincided with attempts by management to introduce the *After Japan* programme. This aimed at cutting costs by increasing the intensity of labour and making greater use of outside suppliers, such as the Hauliers Silcock and Collier. To avoid drawing too facile a distinction between Fordist vertical integration and post-Fordist outsourcing, it might be instructive to consider the history of the body works at Ford at this juncture. After all, it was first outsourced to Briggs following the move to Dagenham before being brought back in house. Even at the peak of Fordism, production always included externally sourced components, which were sometimes substituted for those previously produced internally. All the same, the introduction of outsourcing had not previously caused unrest at the subsidiary, demonstrating how a shift in company strategy now met with opposition.

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<sup>558</sup> Personal Collection, The Ford Workers Group "The Combine", 'Fraud News Bulletin: Support the Drivers Fight Unpaid Layoffs!', [w/c 2 February 1981].

<sup>559</sup> 'Lorry Drivers Show the Way: Diary of the Strike', *The Ford Worker: Voice of the Ford (Dagenham) Party Committee of RCPB (M-L)* (London).

At first the 1982 pay negotiations looked set to lead to serious industrial action with preparations made for an official strike while talks were still ongoing. Then Ron Todd began to signal willingness to make concessions on pay and the introduction of controversial new efficiency measures, in return for an improved pension and the earlier introduction of a small reduction in working hours. Just before the strike was scheduled to start, union executives unilaterally withdrew official support for industrial action. An immediate walkout occurred at Halewood, while workers voted in favour of an unofficial strike, both there and in Swansea. As 'convenors felt bound by misguided loyalty to the officials and recommended acceptance, despite their own opposition', the outcome of meetings at other plants was less clear cut. Some reports disputed the accuracy of results called in favour of accepting the offer based on a show of hands. This sparked a 'mini riot that wrecked the union office' in the Dagenham PTA, leaving one senior steward hospitalised.<sup>560</sup> Such outbursts, however, had no effect on the outcome of the pay settlement.

The next major incident at Ford only came about after the announcement of a redundancy programme to cut 3,000 jobs at Halewood in January 1983. Against this backdrop, the sacking of an assembly line worker Paul Kelly for an alleged act of minor vandalism provoked a four-week strike in the PTA Plant, which remained unofficial throughout most of its duration. While the company's redundancy programme went ahead afterwards, this action resulted in Kelly's reinstatement, albeit on another section. Management also backed down on an attempt to introduce new working practices to the Body Plant, which began during this dispute.<sup>561</sup> Unofficial action still proved more effective at defending working

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<sup>560</sup> A Steward at Ford Langley, 'Sold out Also at Ford', *Big Flame: Paper of the Revolutionary Socialist Organisation Big Flame*, February 1982, p. 4. Presumably, Alan Halying wrote this report.

<sup>561</sup> Darlington, pp. 211–12; Brian Groom and Diana Smith, 'Ford May Abandon Portugal Plant Plan', *Financial Times* (London, 23 March 2018), p. 1; John

conditions and resisting the victimisation of trade union representatives than relying on official procedures.

With such redundancies and rising unemployment driven by government policy, which effectively accelerated deindustrialisation, a 'People's March for Jobs' made its way that month from Glasgow towards a rally in London's Hyde Park. While encouraging attendance at this event, the Combine took the opportunity to criticise Ron Todd, who chaired the TUC committee organising the event. This drew a contrast between Todd's rhetorical stance that 'not one more job should disappear' and his involvement in the 'Japanisation of Halewood'. In particular, his suggestion that the unions should make concessions on the issue of redundancies in exchange for a one-off 'interim payment' prompted a call for his resignation. Instead, the FWC highlighted the recent militancy of workers on Merseyside, as well as a strike in defence of jobs at Ford Genk in Belgium.<sup>562</sup>

This gathering took place just four days before Thatcher was scheduled to go to the country. While warning that, '*whoever* wins the Election, the bosses will still be in control', even the Combine held out hope that high attendance might help swing the result.<sup>563</sup> Turnout proved to be disappointing though, foreshadowing the outcome of the vote. The easing of the recession, which characterised most of Thatcher's first term as Prime Minister, and military success in the Falklands left industrial relations eclipsed in a British general election for the first time in well over a decade.

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Lloyd, 'Ford and Unions to See Acas over Halewood Strike', *Financial Times* (London, 31 March 1983), p. 9.

<sup>562</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Workers Group ("The Combine"), 'Fighting Mass Unemployment', 26 May 1983.

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Fighting the International Sweating System, 1979 to 1985**

While shop-floor resistance to the restructuring of production remained effective to some extent, as we have just seen, management and union officials maintained a firm grip over pay negotiations at Ford in Britain. The Combine's attempt to overcome this impasse would entail unprecedented trans-European cooperation between Ford workers. Such a strategy came about in response to a growing awareness of the limitations of workers organising at a national and plant level, given the transnational reach of the firm's strategic operations. The origins of what would become known as the European Ford Workers Combine (EFWC) dated back to the 1978 national pay strike. At that time, strikers in Langley received financial support from workmates in the Netherlands. This led to correspondence between Jan Cartier, Secretary of the Ford Amsterdam Shop Stewards Committee, and Alan Hayling. Their discussion explored the possibility of organising 'a Ford Europe conference on the 35-hour week', with Hayling proposing the inclusion of shop-floor workers among the delegates.<sup>564</sup>

Communication between union representatives from different European subsidiaries had already taken place well before Hayling and Cartier made contact with each other. For instance, British convenors met in Ostend with counterparts from Germany and the Belgian plant in Genk, which operated as part of Ford Werke, from as early as December 1969. Subsequently British and German trade unionists repeatedly, if irregularly, held further discussions under the auspices of the International Metalworkers' Federation (IMF). This has led the historian Sheila Cohen to speculate that the Ostend meeting 'could be seen as the first stage in setting up a permanent European Ford Combine Committee'.<sup>565</sup> However plausible

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<sup>564</sup> Personal Collection, Letter from Alan Hayling to Jan Cartier, 12 January 1979, p. 3.

<sup>565</sup> Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, p. 97. For a detailed history of relations between German and British unions at Ford, see

such conjecture might seem, this was not in fact the case. On the contrary, the IMF and the German union federation IG Metall posed the main obstacles to an ambitious attempt to organise across Ford of Europe's entire workforce.

Such contact actually began between the Combine in Britain and rank-and-file militants from Ford of Europe's periphery. As we saw at the end of last chapter, the first proposal for a meeting came from Cartier in Amsterdam, where a truck plant faced the threat of closure. Then shop stewards from Denmark played an important early role. Since the closure of a Danish assembly plant in the 1960s, the small subsidiary they worked for served as a sales-and-servicing operation.<sup>566</sup> During a pay claim in spring 1979, three shop stewards ran a campaign that called on their workmates to 'Fight the International Sweating System', evoking the memory of events in Britain the previous year:

'Remember the English Ford Workers. Their solidarity broke Ford and the government's antisocial incomes policy.'<sup>567</sup>

Their industrial action took the form of a 'go-slow', which succeeded in securing a pay increase of twenty per cent. At the time workmates in Britain showed solidarity by deliberately sending the wrong parts to a warehouse in Denmark.

With such support suggesting the possibility of greater European co-ordination, the Danish stewards then invited workmates from across Europe to a three-day international conference afterwards.

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Thomas Fetzter, *Paradoxes of Internationalization: British and German Trade Unions at Ford and General Motors 1967-2000*, Critical Labour Movement Studies (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 160–87.

<sup>566</sup> Peter Sørensen and others, 'Ford Denmark and the Scandinavian Market: From Regional Export Base to Periphery', in *Ford, 1903-2033: The European History*, ed. by Hubert Bonin, Yannick Lung, and Steven Tolliday, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions PLAGE, 2003), II, 267–319 (p. 299).

<sup>567</sup> Personal Collection, Fællesklubben Fords Informationsudvalg 'Bekæmp Internationalt Løntrykkeri: Ford Motor Company', [1979]. The original reads: 'Husk de Engelske Ford-arbejdere. Deres sammenhold knækkede både Ford og regeringens asociale indkomspolitik.'

Reporting on proceedings, the left-wing *Socialistisk Dagblad* interviewed Alan Hayling, by then a shop steward at Langley. The interview concluded with his assessment of the situation:

This is about militant workers on the shop floor, workers who have learned through struggle of the need to also stand together internationally because when capital is international, as is the case with Ford, we must be able to fight against it internationally, too. Otherwise, they only play one country's workers off against another, and then we are back where we started.<sup>568</sup>

At the gathering in Copenhagen, militants from Denmark, Spain, Germany, the Netherlands and Britain launched the 'Ford Workers Ring', as it was initially known. To coordinate activities, an international secretariat was also established with Hayling among the members appointed to this committee.

Those present also passed resolutions: launching 'an independent campaign' on the 35-hour week; opposing racism and the exploitation of migrant labour; and proposing internationally coordinated action for a common European employment agreement.<sup>569</sup> The first resolution to be discussed pledged solidarity in the 'fight for the reduction in working hours and the reinstatement of all sacked workers' at Ford Almussafes, which was then sent by telegram to comrades working in Valencia.

This gesture came about in response to intense disturbances at the Spanish car plant. Industrial action erupted there amid a wider upheaval in Spanish workplaces after the ratification of the new Spanish constitution, the legalisation of

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<sup>568</sup> 'Et fantastisk initiativ vore danske kammerater har taget', *Socialistisk Dagblad* (København, 10 October 1979), p. 5. The original reads: 'Der er tale om militante arbejdere på gulvplan, - arbejdere som gennem kamp har lært nødvendigheden af at stå sammen - også internationalt. For når kapitalen er international som det er tilfældet med Ford må vi arbejdere også bekæmpe den internationalt. Ellers spiller de bare det ene lands arbejdere ud mod det andet. Og så er vi lige vidt.'

<sup>569</sup> Personal Collection, Ford U.K. Workers Group (The Combine), 'A Combine Notice: European Ford Workers Ring' [c. October 1979].

left-wing parties and labour organisations and the first free union elections since the death of Franco. Against this backdrop, the dispute at Ford over a new pay contract that February formed part of wider opposition to the austerity that accompanied Spain's transition to liberal democracy. It resulted in a government-imposed settlement and the sacking of thirteen trade unionists, provoking a hunger strike that held out for more than two weeks.<sup>570</sup>

On the second day of the Copenhagen conference, an assembly of militant Ford workers also took place in Valencia. This meeting sent a report back to their workmates in Denmark. Warning that the company has 'declared war on the workers for refusing to accept its plans', this painted a bleak picture of the situation inside the Spanish plant:

The trade unions are increasingly weak and incapable. They are not functional; they cannot bring thirty people together. CC.OO. has been decapitated and the latest dismissals have exacerbated the situation.<sup>571</sup>

The statement was signed by 'Movimiento Comunista (en Ford)' (MC), a Maoist group that then generally organised within the Communist led Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO., Workers' Commissions) union. The decision in this case to instead set up a workers' assembly showed a degree of continuity with the previous practices of the Organización de Izquierda Comunista (OIC, Organisation of the Communist Left). This left communist/workerist group, which had merged into MC earlier that year, had had a relatively significant presence at the plant from its opening.<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> Robert Graham, 'Hunger Strike in 15th Day at Spanish Ford', *Financial Times* (London, 19 April 1979), p. 2.

<sup>571</sup> Personal Collection, Movimiento Comunista (en Ford) 'Las problemas más importante que en la lucha tenemos planteados', 6 October 1979. The original reads: 'La incapacidad y debilidad de las secciones sindicales va en aumento. No funcionan, son incapaces de reunir a treinta personas. CC.OO. está dezcaberrada y los últimos despidos han agudizado más la situación. The Workers' Commissions (Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO.)), the Communist led union federation, was the largest both in Spain and at Ford Almussafes at the time.

<sup>572</sup> Joel Sans Molas, 'Militancia, vida y revolución en los años 70: la experiencia de la Organización de Izquierda Comunista (OIC)' (unpublished

This was not the only organisation from the Spanish labour movement influenced by the politics of working-class autonomy to become involved in the Ring. To begin with, the anarcho-sindicalist Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (CNT) also had contact with this network of militants. Writing to ‘the constituents of the European Ford Workers Ring’ on behalf of the CNT in May 1980, M. Angeles and A. Martinez queried the progress of a draft questionnaire and reported on developments at the Spanish plant. They decided to send this letter directly to local activists though with an oblique explanation that ‘things are not going well between us, that is to say at the level of the secretariat’, suggesting that tensions existed between them and others involved.<sup>573</sup>

Both the CNT and MC soon became marginalised within the ‘ring’. Rather than political differences between different groups of militants, this probably reflected their increasing marginalisation inside the Spanish plant due to increased repression and a normalisation of labour relations through the mainstream union federations. However short-lived such involvement was, it demonstrated that the politics of working-class autonomy influenced sections of Ford’s European workforce outside Britain.

That December Jan Cartier invited delegates to another meeting of the ‘so-called “Ford Workers Ring”’. At the time he also proposed that the agenda should include discussion of an “Official” Conference of Ford Workers [...] organized by the official Trade Union organizations’. Cartier went on to suggest how they should relate to the trade unions:

To avoid all misunderstanding we want again [to] make clear that this meeting is organized by the shop-stewards

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Doctoral Thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 2017), p. 444  
<[https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/tesis/2017/hdl\\_10803\\_457365/jsm1de1.pdf](https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/tesis/2017/hdl_10803_457365/jsm1de1.pdf)>  
[accessed 9 May 2018].

<sup>573</sup> Personal Collection, Letter from M. Angeles and A. Martinez to the constituents of the European Ford Workers’ Ring, 12 May 1980. The original reads: ‘a nivel de Coordinadora es decir de relacion con vosotros no an-amos muy bien’.

committee of the Ford Amsterdam plant. D.I.A.S. [Diensten Internationale Arbeiders Samenwerking (International Workers Cooperation Services)] will give organizational support. The intention of the meeting is to interchange information and strengthen the cooperation between shop stewards and union militants from the different European Ford Plants. It is not the intention to form an alternative to the existing cooperation between the “official” European Unions. Of Course our aim is to get an as broad as possible representation from every country.<sup>574</sup>

This statement might well have reflected Cartier’s own views as senior shop steward accurately enough. That he felt the need to clarify the point at length in an invitation to the next meeting, however, indicated concern that such informal gatherings of Ford workers without prior trade-union approval might be viewed differently.

It also reflected a tension that ran through the history of the EFWC between attempts to secure official support for European co-ordination of rank-and-file trade unionists at Ford and a more independent approach to organising from below. As demonstrated by the situation in Spain, this entailed bringing together workers from across Europe who faced different political contexts, in terms of how labour relations were mediated in each specific country. While it was necessary to confront the challenges that this raised, engaging with organisations from outside the traditional confines of mainstream trade unionism certainly proved more straightforward. Alongside DIAS, the Counter Information Service (CIS) the Trans National Institute (TNI) and the Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems (CAITS) all provided support to the EFWC.

At the Amsterdam meeting, ten lay trade-union representatives, Cartier among them, welcomed participants from all the countries represented previously:

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<sup>574</sup> Personal Collection, Letter from Jan Cartier to ‘Dear friends’, 12 December 1979.

Alan Hayling from England; a German shop steward Rudolf Bambach; Magens Hegelund and Erik Schou, two of their previous hosts in Denmark; and Ignacio Ortega, a CC.OO. delegate from Valencia. Two more delegations joined them: the Confédération générale du travail (CGT) secretary and another representative from Ford Blanquefort in Bordeaux; and two members of União Geral de Trabalhadores (UGT) from the Lisbon works council.<sup>575</sup>

Details of the discussions were recorded on a handwritten note among Alan Hayling's papers. Among other things, the talks addressed the challenge of making such events official when certain unions 'do not want their membership to make international links'. In particular, the German, Belgian and English unions were identified as 'not very effective' in this respect. Likewise, a delegation of Portuguese office staff reported that fears of 'communist infiltration' led to their own union the social democrat UGT's opposition to involvement.<sup>576</sup> This gave an early indication of how Cold War divisions between trade unions would pose an obstacle to effective transnational cooperation by Ford workers.

The extent of such divisions was apparent at the IMF Ford World Auto Conference in Valencia in November 1980. Delegations reflected the make-up of the IMF, an affiliate to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), an anti-Communist breakaway from the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU). This left the CC.OO. and CGT, the largest unions at Ford in Spain and France respectively, unrepresented. Local rivals even had a veto over their attendance as observers. A CC.OO. report to the rest of the Combine described how a request to participate met the condescending response '[only] if they were good boys', adding that 'CCOO never received the invitation so apparently they have not

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<sup>575</sup> Personal Collection, 'European Ford Workers Combine Annexe I: Introduction by Delegation Members', January 1980.

<sup>576</sup> Personal Collection, loose sheet number 16-17 beginning '6. Continuation of the work of the Combine' and '7. How can we get official international meetings?', [1980], p. 17.

been “good boys”<sup>577</sup> Even the choice of location represented a cynical attempt to swing union elections at Ford Almussafes in favour of the UGT. Instead of requesting observer status, the main Ford union in Portugal the Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores Portugueses (CGTP) decided to send delegates to an EFWC meeting, where they could at least participate fully. The situation was less problematic for Ford’s northern European workforce, since all the relevant unions were affiliated to the IFTUC. Apart from two convenors, however, the British delegation consisted almost entirely of full-time officials, with craft unions also overrepresented relative to those representing workers of lower skill status.

Another EFWC meeting then took place in Bordeaux from 6 to 8 November 1981. Alan Hayling set out how to make the case for an official delegation from Britain. He recommended to one of his fellow participants, probably a senior CGT or CC.OO. delegate, how to write to Danny Connor, Sid Harraway and Steve Hart. While the first two were Ford convenors, Hart was not even a shop steward, but he was a member of the CPGB Central Committee working at Dagenham. Hayling specified three points to be raised in the letter:

(A) that the majority of delegations (Holland, Denmark, France, Spain, Portugal) are trade union representatives and that it would be better if that were also true for England. (B) that the E.F.W.C. is not dominated by the ‘ultra left’—in fact there are many members of Communist Parties involved notably from France, Spain, Portugal and Holland. (C) that you are writing as a fellow CP member.<sup>578</sup>

Alongside the Cold War divisions mentioned already, the EFWC also had to overcome the suspicions of senior Communists at Ford Dagenham towards the

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<sup>577</sup> University of Warwick, Modern Records Centre, 923/7, ‘IMF Ford World Auto Council: List of Participants’ 17-19 November 1980; and European Ford Workers Committee, ‘Report on the London Meeting’ 5-7 December 1980, p. 14.

<sup>578</sup> Personal Collection, handwritten note beginning ‘Please write to:—Danny Connor, Sid Harraway, Steve Hart’ (emphasis in the original).

Combine in Britain. Such an appeal to the involvement of Communist Party members might seem incongruous given the Trades Union Congress's (TUC) affiliation to the ICFTU. Yet, it reflected the specific role of Communist politics in the subsidiary's labour history, as well as more general idiosyncrasies of British trade unionism.

After the Bordeaux conference Pierre Norrito wrote to DIAS on behalf of the local work's council. Norrito began by expressing surprise at DIAS's plans to hold another planning meeting in Paris that April, indicating that the CGT would be reluctant to host such an event. He went on to draw a sharp contrast between the militants from England and Germany, who lacked a trade union mandate, and the official delegations from France, Spain and Portugal. Norrito then clarified the CGT's position going forward. 'We can only accept "observers" if federations refuse' to participate. Recent official communications between the CGT and other union meant it was no longer appropriate to 'maintain contact with groups and individuals that discredit the trade-union movement and are opposed by these organisations nationally and within the workplace', he explained<sup>579</sup> The trade-union strategy of the French Communist Party, which focused internationally on integrating the CGT with ICFTU affiliates, set out to marginalise shop-floor militants who lacked official backing from participating further in the EFWC.

In June 1982 representatives of the main unions at Ford plants in southern Europe, all of which shared Communist Party links, met in France to plan another international conference in Valencia that October. Taking this as an opportunity to legitimise relations with northern European unions, the CGT proposed to press the issue of limiting attendance to official delegations. Mario Caballero of the CC.OO.

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<sup>579</sup> Personal Collection, letter from Pierre Norriot to the DIAS group, [c. April 1982.]. The original reads: 'Ce n'est que s'il y a refus de certaines fédérations que nous pourrions accepter des <<observateurs>>. [...] continuer des contacts avec des groupes ou des hommes qui discréditent le mouvement syndical et sont combattus par ces mêmes organisations d'entreprises et nationales.'

instead argued that the potential of the EFWC should be assessed on its ability to highlight shared demands with one-day or half-day strikes across Europe. The CC.OO. also invited the UGT to co-host this event, but received no response. Extending such an invitation to participate from the closed shop of social democratic unions in Northern Europe to members of rival minority unions among the firm's local workforce brought such co-operation too close to home for the CGT's liking. With all of this left unresolved, the French union intended to secure agreement at the conference on the question of restricting participation to official trade-union delegations in future.<sup>580</sup>

The following month Gerry Walsh, a line worker from Dagenham and founding member of the Combine, discussed this situation with Caballero during a trip to Valencia. At the time he expressed the Combine's objections to both CGT attempt to instrumentalise the Combine for its own strategic goals and CC.OO. advocacy of token industrial action. Walsh instead suggested the need 'to organise around concrete issues', such as plant closures and the transfer of work between subsidiaries, and to organise effective international solidarity during national pay disputes.

He also reported back to comrades in Britain that there had been 'a marked downturn in the struggle' at the Spanish plant, since the late 1970s. Describing the CNT as 'a spent force', he went on to criticise their abstentionism as an opportunist position. Walsh also noted scornfully that such a stance had not prevented the syndicalists from taking court action against a rival faction, following a split within the organisation. While the CNT by now dismissed the EFWC as no more than a Communist front, he still forwarded their current address details to DIAS with Caballero's recommendation that they be kept informed of progress with the EFWC. During a visit to the plant Walsh also met with one of four remaining

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<sup>580</sup> Personal Collection, photocopy of a letter from Gerry [Walsh] to Bill, 21 July 1982.

'autonomist' shop stewards. While sharing 'politics much closer to [...] the U.K. group', they now had insufficient cadres within the plant to do more than operate as a militant tendency within the CC.OO. Although he saw Comisiones Obreras as politically to the right of the FWC, at least in Caballero the union had a secretary at Ford who shared common commitments.

The conference scheduled for Valencia that October never took place. The following month Caballero informed Alan Hayling that it had been rescheduled until after the New Year, so as to increase the likelihood of more plants sending delegations. Since being notified of this postponement, he went on to explain, that Bernie Passingham had already offered his support as the Secretary of the Convenors at Ford from all the plant in Britain. Confirmation was also received directly from shop stewards in Dagenham and Halewood, as well as from Genk. While this left Caballero fairly upbeat in his assessment of their prospects of success, he also raised concerns about a possible boycott organised by the European Metalworkers' Federation (EMF), which had been brought to his attention by contacts in the Spanish UGT.<sup>581</sup>

The following April Caballero reported progress to CC.OO. members at the Spanish plant. An event described as 'the First Conference of Ford Europe Union Representatives' was scheduled from 25 to 27 March. Delegates had already confirmed attendance from twelve English plants, Bordeaux, Lisbon, Genk and Copenhagen, but he still awaited a response from Ford Werke plants in Germany and Spanish 'comrades' from the UGT.<sup>582</sup> Unions from across most of Europe began to engage officially in a process, which emerged from informal contact between members of the Combine, rank-and-file trade unionists from the periphery of Ford of Europe and a handful of other shop-floor militants.

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<sup>581</sup> Personal Collection, Letter from Mario [Caballero] to Alan [Hayling], 12 November 1982.

<sup>582</sup> Mario Caballero, 'Editorial: La Conferencia de Ford Europa', *Informatin Laboral CC.OO. Sección Sindical de Ford España*, 1.8 (1983), 3–4.

Then in February 1984 the TGWU Centre in Eastbourne hosted the European Ford Workers Conference. Bernie Passingham began proceedings by welcoming delegates on behalf of the Ford UK National Convenors Committee. TGWU National Organiser Ron Todd, who became General Secretary later that year, then made the opening address. Official delegations came from five other European countries, as well as Brazil, although German involvement still remained limited to unofficial participants now relegated to the status of observers.<sup>583</sup>

Financial assistance came from the Greater London Council (GLC) and Merseyside County Council (MCC), the two main hubs of a municipal socialist opposition to the Conservative government's political offensive. Organisational support also came from the CAITS. This research unit at North London Polytechnic emerged from the Lucas Aerospace Combine's alternative *Corporate Plan*. The two combines took distinct approaches: one embarked on a project of reimagining socially useful production in an effort to defend jobs; the other adopted a more confrontational approach focused on pay, hours and working conditions. The *Lucas Plan* came out of a specific set of circumstances, beginning with a ministerial proposal by Tony Benn to shop stewards who appealed for his help to defend jobs. Such an approach also reflected differences between more specialised branches of engineering and mass production though. The extent of workers' estrangement from their labour on the assembly line at Ford pointed in a much more antagonistic direction, making the inception of such a scheme there inconceivable.

The role CAITS played in compiling a report of the EFWC showed common ground between the two approaches, suggesting the need to keep such differences in perspective. This recorded how the chairman, Passingham presumably, contrasted this meeting with those of the IMF, referring to his own regular

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<sup>583</sup> Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems (CAITS), *European Ford Workers Conference Report: The Future of Ford?* (London: Centre for Alternative Industrial and Technological Systems (CAITS), 1984).

attendance at these gatherings for over a decade. 'I get more information, more inspiration', he enthused, 'from meetings of this character than I do in the IMF'. He went on to confirm the federation's continued refusal to engage with an event that was open to all the relevant unions, irrespective of their political links. This remained the case despite an exchange of correspondence and telephone conversations with IMF General Secretary Herman Rebhan, who personally declined an invitation.

Having fled Poland in his youth, Rebhan became a US citizen before embarking on a career as an official with the United Automobile Workers (UAW). By his own account, Eastern European origins, a background in 'Zionist Social Democratic' politics and the experience of organising with the UAW contributed to his staunchly anti-Communist outlook.<sup>584</sup> As IMF General Secretary, he also developed particularly close connections to IG Metall in Germany, perhaps the most centralised and certainly the most well integrated union in the European automobile sector. Following the introduction of the German Codetermination Act (*Mitbestimmungsgesetz*) of 1976, legislation codifying the participation of workers in the boardroom, Herman Rebhan even became vice chairman of the Ford Werke supervisory council (*Aufsichtsrat*). While any individual's role should not be overstated, Rebhan's personal history encapsulated the political basis of IG Metall and the IMF's hostility to greater coordination between Ford of Europe's fragmented workforces.

A telex message Rebhan sent from Geneva to Don Stallman, United Automobile Workers (UAW) Director of Governmental and International Affairs, the following February made his position explicit. This message addressed a query

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<sup>584</sup> Interview with Herman Rebhan, The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Labor Series, 1995, p. 2 <<https://www.adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Rebhan,%20Herman.toc.pdf>> [accessed 13 June 2018].

regarding an invitation that the UAW had received to another International Ford Workers Conference on Merseyside that year. Rebhan spelled out his stance:

FORD MEETING IN LIVERPOOL PRESENTS IMF WITH CERTAIN PROBLEMS. [...] ALTHOUGH ENDORSED BY NATIONAL TGWU LEADERSHIP IT IS BEING ORGANIZED BY LEADING COMMUNIST SHOP STEWARDS INSIDE FORD. OTHER FORD UNIONS IN UNITED KINGDOM NOTABLY AUEW NOT INVOLVED. [...] REPRESENTATIVES FROM COMMUNIST UNIONS IN SPAIN, FRANCE AND PORTUGAL ARE BEING INVITED AND WILL USE OCCASION TO ATTACK IMF AFFILIATED UNION EVEN WHEN AS IN CASE OF MAJOR FORD PLANT IN VALENCIA UGT (IMF-AFFILIATED HAS MAJORITY IN PLANT).<sup>585</sup>

From dissident members active in the Combine from the outset to senior leaders who brought with them the conflicting agenda of different national parties, Communists across Europe had a complex, ambivalent relationship with the EFWC. On the other hand, the IMF's hostility and IG Metall's refusal to participate posed far more consistent obstacles to trans-European coordination between Ford workers.

Despite such attempts to obstruct proceedings, shop-floor delegations from sixteen countries attended the Ford World Workers Conference in Liverpool over three days between 15 and 17 March 1985. Bernie Passingham chaired the meeting, which was hosted by the Ford UK National Convenors Committee. Delegates 'agreed to stop the company raising production in one country to crush industrial action in another'.<sup>586</sup> As an example of such transnational solidarity,

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<sup>585</sup> Personal Collection, transcript of cable from Herman Rebhan to Don Stillman, 5 February 1985.

<sup>586</sup> 'Ford Unions in Major Solidarity Boost', *Morning Star* (London, 18 March 1985), p. 1. See also 'Worldwide Ford Workers Meet', *Morning Star* (London, 15 March 1985), p. 5; Ian Hamilton-Frazer, 'Ford Workers Agree to Worldwide Mutual Support', *Financial Times* (London, 18 March 1985), p. 10.

Passingham cited the refusal of workers in Britain to handle South African parts during a German dispute over working hours.

In his study of cross-border co-operation between Ford unions, Thomas Fetter emphasised the ineffectiveness of such attempts before the introduction of European Works Councils in the transition towards European Union integration. He also argued against interpreting such activity as 'rooted in idealistic notions of working-class solidarity', suggesting a more complex situation in which 'banal nationalism' remained a significant political motive.<sup>587</sup> No doubt, this reflected aspects of trade union *realpolitik* more accurately than such a naive, if hypothetical, class analysis. However, Fetzter's institutional approach, an almost exclusive focus on Anglo-German relations and his lack of attention to the early-1980s obscured how many rank-and-file trade unionists and other shop-floor militants framed their own actions precisely in terms of such solidarity.

That said, the EFWC ultimately had a very limited impact. A myriad of factors affected this overdetermined outcome. Restructuring, the introduction of new technology and excess capacity had already begun to shift the balance of power away from European automobile workers before transnational links began to develop. The Cold War agenda of the IMF certainly did not help matters; nor did those Communist trade unionists who adopted an instrumentalist approach to a process initiated on the shop floor. Perhaps most importantly, the lack of involvement of IG Metall, which represented workers at what had become Ford's main European subsidiary, severely hampered the whole exercise. In some sense, however, it became a victim of its own success with official recognition moderating the agenda. With workers increasingly on the defensive, shop-floor involvement in discussions between European workplace representatives posed less of a challenge to trade union officials.

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<sup>587</sup> Fetzter, p. 5. Fetzter explicitly draws this distinction between trade union politics and of labour conflict to distinguish his work from that of Beverley J. Silver.

### **So why didn't we Squeeze? 1983 to 1990**

By the beginning of Margaret Thatcher's second term as Prime Minister, few signs remained at Ford of an organised tendency committed to the politics of working-class autonomy. Big Flame started to undergo a shift in orientation away from Ford before beginning to unravel as a national organisation, which effectively dissolved in 1984.<sup>588</sup> The previous year Alan Hayling took redundancy from Langley to work with the Greater London Council's Popular Planning Unit. Through the GLC, however, he continued to support EFWC conferences and rank-and-file union activity at Ford.<sup>589</sup> That year also saw the longstanding external militant Ed Emery embark on a cultural turn of sorts with Red Notes publishing material from a series of theatre workshops by the Italian dramatists Dario Fo and Franco Rame.<sup>590</sup> Restructuring drove car workers on to the defensive and began to displace the automobile sector from a central position in the British economy. In these circumstances, political practices that were predicated on identifying the mass worker in this sector as a hegemonic antagonistic social subject became increasingly untenable.

This history still left a legacy on the industrial unrest that continued to feature in labour relations at Ford, as already seen in a wider European context. The trade union activists that took over the main 1107 branch of the TGWU at Dagenham in 1983 had prior experience of organising with the Combine, which remained active as a means of organising independently of formal union structures. In doing so they built upon practices previously established by the Combine: overcoming sectarian divisions on the left; promoting international solidarity; and

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<sup>588</sup> archivearchie, 'EPISODES IN BIG FLAME HISTORY: No 30. The Last Years', *Big Flame 1970-1984* <<https://bigflameuk.wordpress.com/2010/01/11/episodes-in-big-flame-history-no-30/>> [accessed 24 July 2018].

<sup>589</sup> Hayling.

<sup>590</sup> Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Dario Fo and Franca Rame: Theatre Workshop at Riverside Studios, London. April 28th, May 5th, 12th, 13th, & 19th 1983* (London: Red Notes, 1983).

challenging racial and sexual discrimination.<sup>591</sup> While the 1107 branch demonstrated a degree of continuity in workplace organising activity at Ford, the two major disputes of this period paint a very different picture. The first of these took place over the closure of the foundry in 1984; the other concerned a new contract introduced in 1988. Taken together, these demonstrated the extent of shifts in the balance of forces both at Ford and across the rest of British industry.

On 17 January 1984 Ford announced plans to close the Dagenham foundry the following April. This would cost 2,000 jobs, bringing the issue of unemployment to the fore. This decision came about despite the workforce having already met a series of targets, which had been set by management over the previous four years as part of a rescue package. Speaking on behalf of negotiators, Ron Todd appeared willing to support a robust response at first. 'This is a fight over the total manufacturing capacity of Ford of Britain, not just the foundry. We are going to involve the whole of the workforce.'<sup>592</sup> He also called on union members not to handle any imported engine components, suggesting the likelihood of official industrial action.

The following day the FNJNC went further and decided to recommend a national strike. Foundry workers then voted overwhelmingly in favour of such action at a mass meeting. The Combine issued 'a call to action' to their workmates later that day. Arguing that the 'closure of the Foundry clearly puts all our jobs at risk', the text observed that Dagenham was on course to become a mere assembly plant with the subsidiary's workforce cut by over a quarter since 1979.<sup>593</sup> It also noted that the corporation had extracted £1,000,000,000 of profit from Britain over

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<sup>591</sup> Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, pp. 133–84.

<sup>592</sup> Brian Groom, 'Ford Dagenham Foundry to Close', *Financial Times* (London, 17 January 1984), p. 1.

<sup>593</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Workers Group ('The Combine'), 'Fraud News Dagenham Leaflet', 18 January 1984, p. 2.

the previous six years, all at the expense of the sort of reinvestment required to keep operations such as the foundry viable.

While broadly supportive of industrial action, a broadsheet published by the Socialist Workers Party raised concerns about the motivations behind the apparently tough union stance: 'Understandably, there has been widespread suspicion of union officials' motives. It is, after all, election time in the TGWU.' At the time Ron Todd was standing, successfully as it turned out, for the position of General Secretary. 'Union leaders', the piece went on to warn, 'have never forgiven the rank and file Ford workers for taking the strike in 1978 out of their hands'.<sup>594</sup>

Then in an unprecedented step at Ford, union officials representing both hourly paid workers and salaried staff wrote jointly to management, requesting a meeting before a strike was scheduled to commence on 13 February. While industrial action was initially deferred after management agreed to further talks, the newly formed Ford Unions Joint Co-ordinating Committee (FUJCC) appeared at first committed to a hard-line stance. 'The strike's on', an FUJCC leaflet announced, urging workers to delegate the committee authority to call industrial action if management refused to agree to the withdrawal of the foundry's closure notice and to provide further investment.<sup>595</sup>

While adopting such tough rhetoric, the FUJCC excluded even the most senior shop stewards and convenors. Its membership was composed exclusively of trade-union officials. Before talks began these full timers then decided to continue with negotiations whether or not management agreed to discuss the survival of the foundry. This undermined a previous position taken by plant convenors that talks could only take place if this issue remained at the top of the agenda. Internal debate within the unions on the issue was shut down at a Joint Works Committee meeting.

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<sup>594</sup> Personal Collection, Socialist Workers Party, 'Stop the Foundry Closure!' [c. February 1984].

<sup>595</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Unions Joint Co-ordinating Committee, 'The Strike's On' [February 1984].

'The smell of a sell-out is high', *Fraud News* warned, while publicising a mass lobby of the 22 February talks called by shop stewards from the Dagenham PTA, Engine and Body Plants.<sup>596</sup>

At this meeting a company presentation, which provided an overview of the issues effecting investment from the firm's perspective, dominated proceedings. Union negotiators only managed to raise concerns about the foundry after an adjournment. Then Ford of Europe Vice President of Manufacturing W. J. Hayden set out management's position bluntly: 'The decision to close the foundry would not be reversed and he was not prepared to raise false hopes among the foundry employees'.<sup>597</sup> The meeting then came to a close.

Afterwards rumours of a 'revolt' by Dagenham Ford workers opposed to industrial action began to circulate in the press, although the only evidence in support of such claims came from 'unofficial reports' of a recent vote against a strike.<sup>598</sup> That the participants in the ballot were foremen, perhaps the section of staff least likely to show solidarity with hourly-paid workers, received no mention in these reports.

At first union officials continued to call for a strike, before deciding to call off industrial action after yet more talks with the company. While claiming that he now 'believed there would be better communication between management and unions', Ron Todd offered no explanation for such new-found optimism.<sup>599</sup> In the end, the closure of the foundry went ahead without any effective trade-union opposition.

From the perspective of the Combine, this highlighted a strategic error in how the campaign had been organised, as well as weaknesses within the structures

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<sup>596</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Workers Group "The Combine", 'Fraud News Dagenham Bulletin', February 20 1984.

<sup>597</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Britain Industrial Relations, 'Employee Bulletin' 23 February 1984.

<sup>598</sup> Brian Groom, 'Mixed Support for Ford Protest', *Financial Times* (London, 28 February 1984), p. 10.

<sup>599</sup> 'Some Progress in Ford Talks', *Morning Star*, 7 March 1984, p. 5.

and official leadership of the trade unions at Ford. Anticipating further closures, *Fraud News* called for a more locally lead approach:

Do it the miners' way. If there is any fight in any plant under attack, they must come out first, and then the rest of us must support them by coming out ourselves. Let the threatened plants have confidence that we will join them, and that we, all united, can win.<sup>600</sup>

With government policy driving up unemployment, defending jobs became a major point of contention. Yet instead of car plants, the closure of coal pits provoked this politically charged confrontation between organised labour and Thatcher's government. While union officials demonstrated a lack of leadership at Ford, the miners' defensive struggle ultimately ended in defeat. If such an outcome was not necessarily inevitable, the situation stood in stark contrast with previous political impact of less protracted industrial action by miners and car workers alike.

Another major dispute at Ford appeared like a serious possibility three years later. During negotiations of the 1988 pay contract, Ford workers voted to take industrial action in a secret ballot by an overwhelming eighty-eight per cent. With an official strike planned to start the following day, the FNJNC met on Sunday 31 January. At first divisions between the unions averted industrial action. These arose when covert negotiations between AEU officials and the company became exposed. In scenes reminiscent of those surrounding the opening of Halewood, these discussions aimed to establish a single-union agreement for a new plant in Dundee. This would again undermine the national agreement with the introduction of different terms and conditions at the new facility. With representatives of the workforce divided by inter-union rivalries, negotiations resulted in a recommendation to accept a new three-year contract. Though this improved upon the company's original offer in terms of pay, contentious proposals to change

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<sup>600</sup> Personal Collection, Ford Workers Group ("The Combine"), *Fraud News: Dagenham Bulletin*, 9 May 1984.

working practices remained in place. That week workers voted to reject the deal. Then 3,000 of them walked out from the Dagenham PTA Plant before strike action went nationwide the following week.<sup>601</sup>

During the dispute a poster appeared on the picket line, bearing the Combine's subverted *Fraud* logo. A photograph of a Black worker, holding a homemade placard that read 'No Strings' high in his hands, almost filled the entire sheet of paper. This image drew on the previous history of workers' struggle at Ford, echoing the language used by the Combine a decade earlier. Previously the demand had always been raised alongside others though, representing a refusal to let management tie pay increases and other concessions to changes in working practices. That the Combine now raised it on its own pointed to how the power dynamics had changed in favour of the company. The poster still depicted the workforce as retaining leverage though, a point that the only text aside from the *Fraud* logo expressed explicitly: 'We've got them by the bollocks, now squeeze!' This begged a question afterwards, as spelt out in a caption to a photograph of the poster in *Fraud News*: 'So why didn't we squeeze?!'<sup>602</sup>

The strike certainly made its impact felt across Ford of Europe more rapidly than similar disputes had done previously. Further European integration and the move towards just-in-time production left operations elsewhere in Europe more vulnerable to disruption in the production of components at Ford plants in Britain. With stock in the supply chain kept to a minimum under this system, a 'domino effect' began to hit production at plants in Genk, Saarlouis, Amsterdam and Cork within a day or two of industrial action breaking out.<sup>603</sup> As well as the threat the

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<sup>601</sup> Charles Leadbeater, 'Threat of National Strike at Ford', *Financial Times* (London, 5 February 1988), p. 1.

<sup>602</sup> B. P., 'We Were, We Are, We Will Ever Be', *Fraud News* (Ilford, Essex, April 1988), pp. 4-5.

<sup>603</sup> Haig Simonian, 'Domino Effect Hits West German Car Plants', *Financial Times* (London, 10 February 1988), p. 12.

ongoing restructuring of Ford of Europe posed to the workforce, it also exposed new vulnerabilities for the company too.

Within two weeks of the strike starting, officials still engaged in secret talks with management, where they agreed another deal. This covered a shorter period than the original company proposal, running for two years instead of three, and left 'changes in working practices subject to agreement' with the unions.<sup>604</sup> In the end, workers voted by more than two to one in favour of its acceptance. Out of twenty-one British Ford plants, only the Dagenham PTA workforce voted down the offer. Communist Party member and FNJNC Secretary Jim Arlie described the settlement as having 'forced major changes from the company', representing it as a victory. TGWU General Secretary Ron Todd described the outcome as having 'vindicated his trust in his members', a remark that revealed where he felt the burden of trust lay between trade-union members and officials.<sup>605</sup>

In contrast to such congratulatory statements, the final issue of *Fraud News* offered a more sombre assessment, while tracing industrial action back to unofficial stoppages and mass lobbies of the negotiations the previous year. Union leaders, such as FNJNC Deputy Chairman Derek Horn who claimed 'there are no strings at all attached to this agreement', came under criticism for misrepresenting the final offer before the final vote.<sup>606</sup> While winning minor concessions on the implementation of this process, union officials abandoned a position of strength without a fight on the substantive issue.

TGWU official Steve Hart, a Eurocommunist in the factional splits then dividing the CPGB, came under particularly harsh scrutiny. As well as obstructing

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<sup>604</sup> 'Ford Workers Vote to Accept Pay Deal', *Morning Star* (London, 19 February 1988), p. 12.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>606</sup> Ford Workers Group ('The Combine'), 'We Were Conned. We Were Robbed. Now We Must Fight the Strings!', *Fraud News* (Ilford, Essex, April 1988), p. 1.

rank-and-file involvement in the strike, Hart stood accused of failing to support a shop steward sacked on false charges from the Dagenham Body Plant shortly beforehand. Publication of an old photograph of him in a Combine t-shirt mocked him for having previously presented himself as more sympathetic to the shop-floor militants. While supporting a left-wing campaign for control of the unions, the Combine also emphasised the need for their workmates to take collective action themselves to prevent the introduction of team working, temporary labour, quality circles and the like.

The pay claim that ran between 1989 and 1990 told a similar story. In response to an offer of a 9.5 per cent pay rise with a further increase of 2.5 per cent above inflation the following year, a series of unofficial strikes broke out during negotiations. A ballot also indicated overwhelming support for a strike with eighty-one per cent of votes cast in favour of industrial action. Such signs initially suggested the possibility of a major confrontation. Yet, union negotiators then avoided official action by re-balloting the membership. While some unofficial stoppages took place afterwards, these involved skilled workers defending their sectional interests, instead of involving the wider workforce. This gave yet another indication of the shift in power away from the broad mass of Ford workers.<sup>607</sup>

Meanwhile, widespread social unrest outside the factory put the significance of the situation at Ford into perspective. By the end of the year a campaign of direct action against the poll tax led to the resignation of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. This conjuncture lent itself to analysis in terms of the 'social wage', since this policy threatened a regressive shift in the burden of taxation raised to pay for local government services. While the outcome of industrial unrest at the carmakers in the 1980s was not a foregone conclusion, the relative impact of these two

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<sup>607</sup> 'Ford and Unions to Meet Next Week on Pay', *Financial Times* (London, 4 January 1990), p. 7; Michael Smith and Michael Cassell, 'Ford Faces Disruption Despite Vote', *Financial Times* (London, 25 January 1990), p. 1; Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, pp. 159 & 163.

conflicts was striking. The analysis of autonomist Marxists, such as Negri, who view this as a period of transition away from the 'mass worker' as hegemonic social subject towards more socialised forms of working-class subjectivity, can only be understood in relation to this conjuncture. Autonomist Marxist theory and the history of working-class struggle at Ford converged with more global political and economic changes, the legacy of Thatcherism and Japanese just-in-time production.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

At the end of the 1980s, Marco Revelli, a founding member of Lotta Continua and a former contributor to the workerist periodical *Primo Maggio*, concluded his account of work at Fiat with an analysis of developments there in the 1980s.<sup>608</sup>

Alongside a collection of Negri's work published the previous year, this was one of the last works from the Italian movement translated by Red Note.<sup>609</sup> In it Revelli provided a detailed account of changes to the labour process situated within a wider historical and political context. In doing so, he framed the lack of effective resistance to mass layoffs, which saw around half Fiat's workforce effectively dismissed, in terms of a moment of working class decomposition. His analysis drew out the role of technology in the 'liquidation of the working class as a subjective dimension within the labour process', undermining the Communist myth of the development of the productive forces as a primarily progressive process.

The situation at Ford in Britain differed from that in Italy, where Fiat led the way in terms of automating European car production, having experienced some of the most intense industrial conflict seen across the worldwide automobile sector.

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<sup>608</sup> Marco Revelli, 'Capitolo 7', in *Lavorare in Fiat* (Milano: Garzanti, 1989), pp. 125–64.

<sup>609</sup> Marco Revelli, '[Draft Translation:] Power Relations at FIAT', trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery] (London, 1989); Antonio Negri, *Revolution Retrieved: Writing on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects (1967-83)*, trans. by Red Notes [Ed Emery and John Merrington] (London: Red Notes, 1988).

Production methods at the British subsidiary, which first introduced the car assembly line to Europe, were much less developed. While still advanced by the standards of the rest of the British sector, these now lagged behind continental rivals, as well as Ford of Europe operations. In the 1980s the main capitalist innovation in Britain occurred at the level of the state, which pursued a strategy of actively driving deindustrialisation further forward. Yet, Revelli's analysis remained relevant, situating the pattern of international development in relation to workers struggle. This served as a reminder of the political dynamics connecting the industrial unrest of the long 1970s, so much of which played out at Ford, with the Thatcherite response of restructuring.

## **Conclusion**

The production of Ford cars continued in Britain throughout the 1990s and into the early years of the twenty-first century. This section begins, however, by revisiting the long 1970s, so as to highlight the broader historical relevance of the politics of working-class autonomy and industrial unrest at the corporation's British subsidiary. We then examine a more recent and distinctly post-Fordist moment of industrial action, which impacted upon an outsourced link in the firm's supply chain and saw the subverted *Fraud* logo deployed one last time. Finally, we consider the relevance of this history to a number of issues of contemporary concern today. The first of these is a current vogue for accelerationist ideas, which owe something of a debt to autonomist political theory. Another is the recent resurgence of interest in workers inquiry as both a research methodology and tool for political intervention.

## **Workers' Struggle at Ford in the Long 1970s**

The two key early innovations first introduced at Ford, the automated final assembly line and the firm's high-wage policy, came about in the wake of major international syndicalist disturbances. Setting the pace of work automatically extended beyond Taylorism, which already set out to give management greater control over production through the appropriation of workers' knowledge and individualised incentives. Higher wages aimed to buy off workers, who became acutely estranged from this form of labour, which had been entirely stripped of any intrinsic value. Industrial unrest and technological development then intermeshed throughout the history of this twentieth-century icon, a multinational corporation that came to symbolise modern development. This dynamic played out at the firm's British subsidiary as well as in America.

Amid the crisis and social unrest of the interwar period, Ford seemed to answer to the prayers of British industrialists. Then the public investment required for the development of Dagenham foreshadowed subsequent developments. To make this vision a reality required state intervention on an altogether different scale though. Apart from under the conditions of a wartime command economy, the firm only fully realised its full potential as an integral component of the post-war Fordist system.

Meanwhile, the politics of working-class autonomy emerged first in the USA, and then in France and Italy, as an articulation of the perspective of those brought together by this new form of industry. This came about in response to a situation in which production in purportedly socialist countries increasingly mirrored working conditions in developed capitalist countries. Meanwhile, social planning was embraced in the West—calling into question how different these two social models really were. The formation of the libertarian socialist organisation Solidarity in 1960 provided a manifestation of this tendency in Britain, with former Ford shop steward Ken Weller a founding member. While offering a unique perspective on shop-floor unrest at Ford, Solidarity's perspective followed the same political trajectory as *Socialisme ou Barbarie* away from Marxist class analysis.

This then left the group ill-equipped to interpret the period of crisis that began in the late 1960s. Meanwhile, government anti-inflation, industrial and trade policies become increasingly aligned with the interest of Ford. The 1968 sewing machinists strike saw company proposals to penalise unofficial action turned into a template for legislation to impose similar sanctions across the entire workforce of Britain. A national pay strike at Ford the following year then suggested an opportunity to implement such a policy. This backfired, contributing to Labour's defeat in the 1970 general election. The stance taken by leading trade union officials also highlighted the inherent contradictions of the situation. Political

opposition to the introduction of legislation went hand in hand with negotiating an agreement at Ford, which effectively introduced such penalties.

Events in France and Italy then stimulated interest in an open Marxist politics, equipped with the theoretical tools to analyse such a situation of crisis. From 1969 onwards, external interventions at Ford initially emerged from the intersection of far-left politics, the student movement and counter culture. This saw the launch a new rank-and-file newspaper *Big Flame* on Merseyside, the location of the newer of Ford's two main car plants.

Then in 1970 the Heath administration was elected on a manifesto that, while foreshadowing neoliberalism, still relied on the existing policy toolkit of industrial relations legislation and incomes policy. This time there was to be less carrot and more stick though. As the Industrial Relations Bill passed through parliament, the 1971 Ford national pay strike posed the most direct challenge to the introduction of this legislation. However, Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon, the leaders of the two main unions involved, brokered a two-year deal behind the backs of the strikers. This introduced more severe penalty clauses and a requirement to hold secret ballots before official industrial action, once again foreshadowing government legislation. The failure of senior shop stewards to effectively oppose this settlement exacerbated divisions between rank-and-file trade union leaders and increasingly militant groups of workers on the shop floor.

This strike also saw further external intervention. The Angry Brigade bombing campaign made a dramatic impact at Ford, which was framed explicitly in terms of working-class autonomy, whatever gaps remained between theory and practice. In Liverpool *Big Flame* developed into a political organisation that was modelled on *Lotta Continua* (Continuous Struggle), the largest group on the Italian extra-parliamentary left. Taking a leaf out of the book of Italian Workerism (*operaismo*) led to a tactical intervention at the car firm that aimed to generalise

strategies adopted by the most militant sections of shop-floor workers. Against a backdrop of rising inflation and the withdrawal of subsidies for social housing, women members of Big Flame also became involved in housing struggles on Merseyside. This experience along with autonomist and feminist theory underscored the relationships between industrial production and social reproduction. With wage rises increasingly eroded by inflation and social unrest extending outside the factory, the limits of a purely industrial strategy became increasingly apparent.

Trade-union mediation still continued to break down at Ford, though. Shop-floor unrest escalated over lay-offs, manning levels and the pace of production. This gave greater credibility to the critiques of trade unionism made by Big Flame and Solidarity, groups that also increasingly provided militant shop-floor workers with means of communication between different plants across the country. Meanwhile, union officials obstructed industrial action over pay negotiations at Ford, leaving it to other workers to challenge the Heath administration's pay freeze. Industrial unrest still brought down the government though.

As labour returned to power, the Social Contract brought trade union leaders even more closely into alignment with the government. In the wake of the oil shock, their joint solution to the ongoing crisis of British capitalism entailed imposing deflationary wage settlements on workers, a real terms pay cut. This pushed the system of trade-union mediation towards breaking point.

Shop-floor unrest at Ford reached a violent peak during the IMF crisis. The Ford Workers Group (FWG) and the Ford Langley Action Committee (FLAC), workplace groups that put autonomist politics into practice, then emerged at Dagenham and Langley. While Big Flame played a key part in initiating this

development, strategic leadership remained in the hands of members of Ford's workforce.

This network of external militants and workplace groups then initiated a new national organisation the Ford Workers Group ("The Combine") in preparation for the 1978 wage claim. While many of those involved were shop stewards with a broad range of political perspectives, collectively they identified themselves as ordinary workers and organised independently of both the unions and any external political organisations. Before negotiations even began, the Combine ran an unprecedented shop-floor campaign inside the factory and the unions.

This history hinged upon the 1978 national Ford pay strike. No previous pay dispute had seen the same level of shop-floor coordination across all of the firm's plants. At the same time the company's interests fell fundamentally out of alignment with those of the British government. This led to one of the two longest strikes in the history of Ford's local subsidiary. It sparked off a string of similar disputes in what became known as the Winter of Discontent.

The election of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration in 1979 brought with it a fundamental shift in government strategy. This entailed abandoning pay restraint to instead pursue policies that actively fostered deindustrialisation. Thatcher's one-sided solution to the crisis of the long 1970s marked a clear break with previous administrations. Politically, this accelerated a process of working-class decomposition, complementing a technical recomposition of labour both within and beyond the automobile sector.

The Combine remained an effective shop-floor organisation, but fundamental changes in public policy combined with European corporate restructuring increasingly pushed workers onto the defensive. This allowed management and union officials to stave off industrial action during pay negotiations throughout Thatcher's first term in office. That said, unofficial action enjoyed some success in

resisting the introduction of new Japanese-style management techniques, and shop-floor anger could still erupt dramatically at times. Ultimately, it was left to other groups of workers to take major industrial action of national political significance with such defensive struggles ending in defeat.

Ford's corporate restructuring plans encountered one unorthodox form of opposition, which originated on the shop floor. The European Ford Workers Combine (EFWC) came about as a direct result of contacts established through the Combine's role in the 1978 strike. It began with a series of informal discussions between shop stewards and other militants from Britain and other subsidiaries at peripheral to Ford of Europe's main operations. Initially this network included autonomists and anarcho-syndicalists from Spain, where the transition to liberal democracy witnessed particularly intense industrial unrest at Ford Almussafes in Valencia. The EFWC provided a hub for the transnational exchange of information between members, but attempts at more coordinated activity proved less effective. As efforts to gain official union support brought competing agenda to the fore, momentum dissipated and militancy was tempered by the involvement of senior trade unionists. Official backing for a series of transnational labour conferences grew, but cold war politics continued to prevent the German union IG Metall from participating, leaving Ford's largest single European workforce outside the process.

During the 1988 pay negotiations, a walkout at Ford Halewood and heated confrontation between union representatives and workers suggested the possibility of another major confrontation. However, unofficial action quickly fizzled out. Militant shop stewards remained, who managed to challenge racial and sexual discrimination, but management restructuring and redundancies generally went ahead unchecked afterwards. A combination of Thatcherism and Japanese management techniques resolved a decades-long struggle, which had pitted Ford's workforce against the company and the British state.

As the hinge for this history, the 1978 Ford national pay strike merits some further attention. The part that the Ford Workers Combine played in this dispute broadly supports Colin Hay's contention that the Winter of Discontent was symptomatic of trade union weakness, rather than strength. After the trade unions as institutions supported a series of deflationary pay settlements under the Social Contract, shop-floor workers gave industrial action its impetus, acting independently even of the shop steward's leadership. As well as debunking the myth of this as a 'crisis of an overloaded state held to ransom by the trade unions', Hay highlighted the constitutive role of this mythology in the Thatcherite project to transform the state.<sup>610</sup> Emphasising the contingency of this transition, Hay went further though to deny that the crisis arose out of any fundamental contradictions in British Keynesianism. For him, Thatcher and her allies simply exploited issues originating out of the Yom Kippur War. All of this suggested that the trade-off between unemployment and inflation, a key component in the Keynesian macroeconomic toolkit, was temporarily disrupted by an exogenous shock.

It is not clear, however, that the Arab Israeli War was the main driving factor behind the rising cost of energy. Two years beforehand the US State Department had already begun to not just predict but to actively advocate in favour of an oil-price increase. Moreover, America, the hegemonic world power, shared strong strategic ties to the largest OPEC member Saudi Arabia. As an oil producer, the USA potentially gained an economic advantage over other industrial rival, among them Britain, from such a price rise, which also promised to stabilise global supply. In

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<sup>610</sup> Colin Hay, 'Chronicles of a Death Foretold: The Winter of Discontent and Construction of the Crisis of British Keynesianism', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63.3 (2010), 446–70 (p. 447); Colin Hay, 'Narrating Crisis: The Discursive Construction of the "Winter of Discontent"', *Sociology*, 30.2 (1996), 253–77 (p. 261).

any case, the relationship between increasing energy costs and inflation predated the war and were not located exclusively in the Middle East.<sup>611</sup>

Well aware of this, the Midnights Notes Collective, a group of autonomist Marxists in America with links to comrades in Italy and Britain, read the situation differently. Instead of emphasising international competition, this analysis linked the Nixon and Ford administrations' attitude towards oil prices to the breakdown in union-mediated productivity bargaining at the end of the 1960s. Across the developed world wildcat strikes, such as those at Ford in Britain, achieved 'excessive' wage gains that were only wiped out by inflation linked to increased energy costs. As Midnight Notes observed, this situation then led to 'the largest financial flows in the world' to date, which funded the subsequent restructuring the world economy.<sup>612</sup> With western oil companies reaping the benefits alongside OPEC countries, the massive accumulation of capital across the energy sector fuelled another cycle of investment in automation, computerisation and robotics.

Explaining stagflation primarily as an exogenous shock caused by the Middle East conflict obscures how the inflationary policies of western governments responded to the actions of workers in their own countries. A breakdown in the mechanisms for mediating industrial relations during the long 1970s constituted a major contradiction for the Keynesian-Fordist system. While the political and economic aspects of this crisis were intrinsically intermeshed and its outcome far from predetermined, Thatcherism provided a decisive response, however opportunistic and one-sided, to this situation. If Hay rightly emphasises the possibility of political alternatives, we must also recognise that the status quo did not represent one of these.

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<sup>611</sup> Oppenheim, 'Why Oil Prices Go Up (1) The Past: We Pushed Them', *Foreign Affairs*, 25, Winter 1976, 24–57.

<sup>612</sup> Midnight Notes Collective, "Chapter 1. Oil, Guns and Money", in *Midnight Oil: Work, Energy, War 1973-1992* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1992), pp. 6–7.

Framing this period in terms of class composition also suggests a dynamic relationship between the technical composition of labour and working-class subjectivity. Instead of relying upon some notion of a purportedly traditional working-class collective identity, this brings to the fore the actual content of class conflict as an historical phenomenon, with *class* understood as a dynamic relationship rooted in the production of commodities and the reproduction of social relations. In the long 1970s such conflict included industrial unrest, both at Ford and in workplaces across Britain, as well as wider struggles over the social wage. Questions of collectivism versus individualism then become a political problem, rather than a purely analytical question. Moreover, the apparent decline in saliency of class might be understood as a phenomenon bound up with a process of working-class decomposition in which this period ended.

### **Ford beyond Fordism, 1988 to 2009**

Power relations at Ford shifted decisively in favour of management following the 1988 pay dispute. If a successful strike a decade earlier marked a turning point, the situation reached a nadir from a shop-floor perspective by the time Thatcher left office. The production of Ford cars in Britain carried on afterwards for a time, as did militant rank-and-file trade unionism. Such activity also still showed some signs of continuity with the Combine's approach to organising, notably in relation to tackling sex and race discrimination at work.

As the rigid sexual division of labour at Ford started to break down in the 1990s, women workers became increasingly integrated into the wider workforce. This resulted in complaints about the display of pornography inside the Dagenham Engine Plant. Management and the trade union 'moderates' who dominated the Joint Works Committee (JWC) in that particular plant failed to take the issue seriously at first. It took an intervention by Allan Martin, a shop steward active in

the militant 1107 branch of the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU), for the practice to be eradicated.<sup>613</sup>

One woman who worked in Dagenham at the time Janet Marlow later recalled the branch's role in combatting other forms of sexual harassment too. She specifically credited shop stewards with successfully opposing the practice of hiring strippers for retirement celebrations held within the factory. Likewise, when a group of male workers forced their way into a women's changing room, union representatives from the branch pressed for their dismissal. While such solidarity helped foster a less macho workplace culture, Marlow also remembered differences between 1107 shop stewards and women members of the branch.<sup>614</sup>

Not without justification, these union representatives tended to view the introduction of more 'flexible' working practices with hostility. Such changes put downward pressure on full-time wages and threatened to remove whatever leverage shop stewards still retained over management. At the same time, part-time hours suited many women who still tended to carry the overwhelming burden of housework, such as childcare. Solidarity between shop stewards and their women workmates ultimately prevailed. That the interests of the two groups became counterposed to one another, however, still emphasised how the changing composition of the workforce coincided with a shift in the balance of power in management's favour. A decade earlier the Combine had fought casualisation and campaigned for a shorter working week, while confronting thorny issues raised by gender politics much more confidently. That full-time work was now seen as something that had to be defended underscored the extent of change in the power dynamics. This weakening in the position of the workforce can be framed in terms of a political decomposition of labour brought about to a significant extent through a technical recomposition of labour in response to industrial unrest.

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<sup>613</sup> Cohen, *Notoriously Militant: The Story of a Union Branch*, pp. 165–68.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*

With the workforce still mainly made up of men, but extremely diverse in its ethnic composition, racism remained an equally if not more important issue. When a Ford advertising campaign saw the faces of Black workers whitewashed out of the original photograph, a public relations debacle ensued for the firm. Meanwhile, unfair recruitment practices resulted in union lawyers bringing successful claims for racial discrimination to an industrial tribunal. The company was found to have excluded members of ethnic minorities from well-paid positions as drivers and to have only publicised certain other vacancies in parts of the Dagenham estate where white workers were much more likely to see them.<sup>615</sup>

The plant also witnessed serious outbreaks of racist violence. In response to a series of attacks on Black and Asian workers on the Dagenham estate, eight hundred of their workmates eventually walked out from the PTA plant on 5 October 1999. Senior steward Steve Riley, another veteran of the Combine, demanded an investigation by the Commission for Racial Equality. The press reported the activity inside the Dagenham estate of Combat 18, a group of violent neo-Nazis connected to the British National Party (BNP).<sup>616</sup>

Following the party's electoral turn that year, the BNP became the main opposition party on the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Council. Fascist politics had deep local roots as seen in Bob Lovell's recollections of the 1930s. This situation was without precedent anywhere in Britain though.<sup>617</sup> Crucially, it occurred in the aftermath of the closure of the PTA plant, the main bastion of the most militant section of Ford's workforce. Yet again, the deteriorating political situation was linked to the decomposition of labour inside the factory.

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<sup>615</sup> Rebecca Fowler, 'So Who Are the Ford Racists', *Daily Mail* (London, 9 October 1999), pp. 18–19.

<sup>616</sup> Robert Taylor, 'Ford Accused of Racism as Workers Walk Out', *Financial Times* (London, 6 October 1999), p. 1.

<sup>617</sup> Lovell, 'Fords—the Victory for Union Recognition'.

Eventually, corporate executives decided to close the PTA plant despite an ‘impressive productivity turnaround’, which saw new working practices introduced both at Dagenham and Halewood.<sup>618</sup> By the mid-1990s this left both facilities relatively competitive by the standards of operations elsewhere in Europe. All the same, the assembly of Ford cars at Halewood came to an end in 2001, when a new model the *Focus* replaced the *Escort*. Operations only continued afterwards with a much lower output of Jaguar and subsequently Land Rover vehicles, luxury brands briefly acquired by the corporation before being sold on. The following year the Dagenham PTA plant closed, bringing just over ninety years of Ford car production in Britain to an end.

Overcapacity across European markets drove corporate decision-making. Even though Halewood was by then more efficient than Saarlouis, Ford maintained production at the German subsidiary as it had capacity to absorb lost output from the Merseyside plant, but not vice versa. Meanwhile, British monetary policy, which saw sterling overvalued before being forced out of the Exchange Rate Mechanism in September 1992, contributed to the decision to close Dagenham. The volatility of the pound after Black Wednesday initially favoured British exports. However, its price increased again as currency convergence across the Eurozone created greater certainty about production costs between member states. Conservative government policy also made it quicker and cheaper to implement cuts in Britain than in Germany, ‘the downside of Britain’s much-vaunted labour market flexibility’ as Tolliday noted acerbically.<sup>619</sup> Workers’ struggle might not have been the immediate cause of Ford car production in Britain coming to an end. The Conservative government’s decidedly one-sided solution to social and industrial unrest still shaped the context for this outcome though.

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<sup>618</sup> Tolliday, ‘The Decline of Ford’, II, p. 105.

<sup>619</sup> Tolliday, ‘The Decline of Ford’, II, p. 108.

Eight years later another group of workers involved in industrial action adopted the *Fraud* logo one last time, providing a coda to the history of unrest at Ford. Two decades after the Combine's last recorded use of this symbol, the company logo was symbolically stolen once again in support of a campaign of industrial direct action. This occurred after the announcement of the closure of three Visteon plants, which had been formerly owned by Ford, with the loss of six-hundred jobs. In response, Workers decided to occupy the factories.

The roots of this dispute went back to 8 September 1997, when the Ford Motor Corporation announced plans to restructure its international components division into a new company Visteon. While this began as a wholly owned subsidiary, the choice of such a different name created a distinct identity, signalling the intention from the outset to separate this aspect of the business from the rest of the brand. At the time management justified this move in terms of the need to increase sales to other car firms, due to the ongoing consolidation of the components sector. The *Financial Times* reported that the head of this new offshoot Charles Szuluk 'steered clear of the sensitive issue of divestments' though. The article also noted that 'outside suppliers tend to pay workers appreciably less than the leading car makers'.<sup>620</sup> Following recent industrial unrest at General Motors over the divestiture of its components division, Ford initially took a gradual approach, but the direction of travel was clear.

Corporate policy first began to 'treat Visteon as an outside contractor', before the spin-off was formalised with a share issue to Ford stockholders three years later. In preparation for this move, the parent company conducted 'a market-pricing review' with the subsidiary to adjust the rates for the supply of various components. This internal report made clear that 'it is expected that Visteon will reduce prices to Ford', leaving little room for doubt where the costs of

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<sup>620</sup> Haig Simonian, 'Ford Revamps Parts Division', *Financial Times* (London, 9 September 1997), pp. 1 & 20.

outsourcing would fall.<sup>621</sup> With ninety per cent of sales and more than half of all new business still coming from the parent company, the idea that the new firm represented a viable independent business met with scepticism in the financial press from the outset.

Within less than a decade Visteon put British operations into liquidation on 31 March 2009, announcing the closure of three former Ford plants at Basildon in Essex, Belfast and Enfield in North London.<sup>622</sup> Ex-Visteon worker Phil Wilson later recalled how bluntly a consultant from KPMG announced the news to the workforce: 'Visteon UK has just gone into administration—any money that is owed to you you'll have to claim off the government.'<sup>623</sup> At first the workforce received no guarantees that outstanding wages would even be paid, never mind redundancy pay or pensions.

In response, workers spontaneously occupied the plant in Belfast later that night. The next day their workmates in Enfield followed suit. Others in Basildon did likewise, although this third occupation came to an abrupt end after workers 'trashed the site offices', resulting in a threat of criminal prosecution.<sup>624</sup> The Belfast and Edmonton plants still remained in occupation though.

Meanwhile, London hosted a G20 summit. Discussions between government ministers and central bankers from twenty of the most powerful countries focused on the ongoing global financial crisis, a situation that precipitated Visteon's insolvency. While the meeting witnessed popular protest and police violence, which left a bystander Ian Tomlinson dead, the Enfield occupation attracted

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<sup>621</sup> Tim Burt, 'Visteon Strives to Achieve Independence from Ford', *Financial Times* (London, 17 April 2000), p. 28.

<sup>622</sup> London, Bishopsgate Institute, Woodward 70, 'Visteon Workers: Fighting for Pensions Justice'.

<sup>623</sup> Phil Wilson, 'We Knew We Had Nothing to Loose', *Solidarity, The Trade Union Magazine: For Independent, Fighting and Democratic Trade Unionism*, Autumn 2009, pp. 8–9 (p. 8).

<sup>624</sup> *Report & Reflections on the 2009 UK Ford-Visteon Dispute: A Post-Fordist Struggle* (London: Past Tense, 2009), pp. 1–2.

external support too. The most practical solidarity came from the Haringey Solidarity Group (HSG), a local collective based in the neighbouring borough, which originally emerged out of a local anti-poll tax group.

Only one other person remained inside the plant throughout the entire occupation alongside former members of the workforce. He was Alan Woodward, a HSG ‘supporter, though not a member’, as he described himself.<sup>625</sup> Woodward helped draft the one written statement issued throughout the occupation, which was then printed by HSG member Dave Morris. Other members of the group picketed Ford dealers, provided legal information, provided access to a bank account to process donations and played a key role in setting up the Ford Visteon Workers Support Group.

Afterwards one of those involved in the occupation the former convenor Phil Wilson drew a contrast between such concrete solidarity and the response received from union officials:

I remember one stage when we had an official come down to the picket line and basically saying you’re holding out here for something you may never receive, painting a really gloomy picture for us. That was one of our lowest points. I have to say that one of the people that was responsible for lifting our spirits after that was a guy called Tony from Haringey Solidarity that came round in his big white Transit van and just kept all our spirits up—so that just showed me the two different sides where you’ve got a guy down the road that lifted our spirits and someone who we expected to lift our spirits just knocking the stuffing out of us really.<sup>626</sup>

Despite occasional bouts of militant rhetoric, Unite officials oscillated in practice between adopting a passive stance, which was perhaps understandable given the

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<sup>625</sup> Alan Woodward, *Ford Visteon Enfield Workers Occupation: An Eyewitness Account and First Thoughts* (London: Gorter Press, 2009), p. 7.

<sup>626</sup> Phil Wilson, p. 9.

legal implications of any involvement, and actively attempting to end the occupation before the dispute had been resolved. Wilson, who was by his own account less sceptical of the union than many of his workmates, afterwards singled out the official Steve Hart for putting them under pressure to end industrial action before a final settlement had been reached.<sup>627</sup>

In the end union negotiations resulted in a settlement, which represented at least a partial victory for the occupation. Visteon workers achieved this outcome with their most consistent support coming from a group with broadly autonomist/anarchist politics, while Unite trade-union officials played a much more ambiguous role. The main source of outside solidarity came from a group that emerged from the campaign against the poll tax. This could be framed as a struggle over the erosion of the social wage, with a regressive change to fiscal policy shifting the burden of payment for local authority services.

While this situation demonstrated that militant industrial action could still achieve results well after the end of the long 1970s, situating these events in a longer view puts their scale and wider political impact into perspective too. However effective the Visteon workers' actions proved to be, nobody could ascribe to them the same vanguard role as car workers had for proponents of the politics of working-class autonomy in the long 1970s. This is not to belittle the Visteon occupation, but rather to suggest that the notion of an internal vanguard might have served its purpose by then in politically displacing the external vanguard party. Moreover, seeking out a new hegemonic antagonistic social subject seems unlikely to provide any shortcuts to the problem involved in industrial organising today. What contemporary relevance can we glean from this history then?

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<sup>627</sup> Woodward, pp. 15–16.

## Accelerationism and the Politics of Working-Class Autonomy Today

Political ideas owing something of a debt to autonomist Marxism have gained a certain currency in Britain today. The journalist and commentator Paul Mason made as much clear in *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future*, a popular work of political economy that made the *Sunday Times* Bestsellers List. Mason cited Negri's interpretation of a section of Marx's *Grundrisse* the 'Fragment on Machines' as providing a prophetic vision of a Postcapitalist future.<sup>628</sup> In doing so, he set out to popularise a brand of technologically utopianism referred to as left-accelerationism. More recently the founding editor of Novara Media Aaron Bastani signalled that he broadly shared the same position with the title of his book *Fully Automated Luxury Communism*. Along with an unambiguously enthusiastic attitude towards technological progress, Bastani evoked 'the right to luxury', a demand first raised in Italy by autonomist youth associated in the mid-1970s.<sup>629</sup>

Likewise, a provocative and widely cited manifesto by two academics Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams recently proposed, 'a fully automated economy' as the first of three emancipatory demands aimed at revitalising left-wing politics. They too drew upon the 'Fragment on Machines', while situating themselves in dialogue with autonomist Marxists and those influenced by this tendency. Srnicek and Williams recognised that the approach they advocated entailed taking a bit of a gamble. 'The simple wager of the demand for full automation is that wealth can be produced in non capitalist ways.' In fact, the punt they proposed taking went further though.<sup>630</sup> Their argument rested on the assumption that automation

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<sup>628</sup> Paul Mason, *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), pp. 133–38.

<sup>629</sup> Aaron Bastani, *Fully Automated Luxury Communism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2019); Maria Elena Cantilena and Marco Grifo, 'Da Wounded Knee alla Sapienza. La figura dell'indiano nel movimento del 1977: comunicazione transatlantica e ibridazione culturale', *Ácoma*, 2017, 185–214 (p. 195).

<sup>630</sup> Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 109 & 218–19.

necessarily results in such an outcome. For them, a breakdown in the correlation between value and labour time promised to lead to an irreconcilable contradiction between productive forces and capitalist social relations.

Marx certainly speculated about the possibility that such a situation could arise in the 'Fragment on Machines'. Moreover, the emphasis they placed on this text set Italian workerists and autonomist Marxists apart from both a structuralist reading of *Capital* and a Marxist humanist focus on his early writings. In doing so, they aimed to address common concerns across this tendency, such as the need to develop a critical analysis of the changing relationship between the labour process and wider circuits of valorisation and social reproduction. Yet, some of those involved in autonomist politics at the time went on afterwards to reflect critically upon the influence this text had had on them. Notably, George Caffentzis later identified what he saw as a major inconsistency within Marx's logic. While positing a tendency towards the incommensurability of labour time and value, he also continued to explain capitalist crisis in terms of the more familiar tendency of the rate of profit to fall, which he derived from the labour theory of value. According to Caffentzis, Marx later resolved this conceptual contradiction, which they both saw as reflecting a real systemic contradiction too, through the 'rejection/inclusion of the incommensurability thesis' in his subsequent analysis of the general rate of profit.<sup>631</sup> In the third volume of *Capital*, Marx argued that the relationship between labour and value ultimately functioned across the economy as a whole.<sup>632</sup> Significantly, this suggested a relationship between the development of highly automated industries and the ongoing emergence of other new sectors of the economy with a much lower levels of organic composition.

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<sup>631</sup> George Caffentzis, 'From the Grundrisse to Capital and Beyond: Then and Now', *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, 15, 2008, 59–74 (p. 64).

<sup>632</sup> Chapter Nine of Marx, III, pp. 254–72.

The relevance of Caffentzis's argument goes beyond mere Marxology. His reading of Marx informed an analysis of recent structural changes, which had seen the expansion of labour-intensive service sector work alongside the rise of high tech sectors. Crucially, this suggested a mechanism by which the capitalist system adapted to crises linked to technological expansion. In such circumstances, the growing 'techno-skepticism' of the anti-capitalist movement since the late 1960s represented a coherent response according to Caffentzis.<sup>633</sup> Even within autonomist Marxist circles, those who took seriously Marx's analysis of value did not necessarily share the conclusions drawn from the *Grundrisse* by today's left-accelerationists.

Revisiting the politics of working-class autonomy in Britain during the heyday of labour unrest at Ford might help clarify relative merits of Caffentzis's reading of Marx compared to an accelerationist one. While it was left to an American publisher to translate Negri's most relevant work from his seminars at the École Normale Supérieure, Red Notes played a key part in introducing an English readership to much of his writing, which clearly influenced subsequent readings of the *Grundrisse*.<sup>634</sup>

More importantly, another generally overlooked source Raniero Panzieri's 'Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on the Reading of "Capital"' cast light on the origins of this debate. This text only came out in English as the opening article of the first pamphlet of the Conference of Socialist Economists' (CSE), which as we have seen then shared links to Big Flame and Red Notes. The translator of this text

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<sup>633</sup> Caffentzis, 'From the Grundrisse to Capital and Beyond: Then and Now', p. 69.

<sup>634</sup> Antonio Negri, *Marx oltre Marx: Quaderno di lavoro sui Grundrisse*, Materiali Marxist, 442 (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979); Antonio Negri, *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, ed. by Jim Fleming, trans. by Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey, 1984); see also, for instance, 'Marx beyond Marx: Working Notes on the Grundrisse' in Negri, *Revolution Retrieved: Writing on Marx, Keynes, Capitalist Crisis and New Social Subjects (1967-83)*, pp. 155–76.

neglected to mention that the Italian original served as the introduction to the first Italian translation of Marx's 'Frammento sulle macchine'. In the piece, Panzieri criticised Lenin for equating state planning with socialism in theory, while in practice replicating capitalist social relations in production. Panzieri linked this to a broader critique of orthodox Marxism, which he traced back to an ambiguity in Volume One of *Capital*. By emphasising the contrast between factory planning and the anarchy of circulation, Marx suggested that this tension constituted an inherent contradiction intrinsic to capitalism, rather than one affecting the dynamics of a particular historic phase of the system's development.<sup>635</sup>

Panzieri then considered the possibility that the *Grundrisse* might inform an alternative to the failed Leninist model of transitioning to Communism through state planning. In doing so, he made just one direct reference to the text though:

Throughout Marx there is, if anything, a theory of the "unsustainability" of capitalism at its highest level of development (see the final part of the fragment from the *Grundrisse* published below). The "superabundant" productive forces then enter into conflict with the "restricted base" of the system and the quantitative measurement of labour becomes a blatant absurdity. Yet, this perspective immediately refers us back to another question. The development of capitalism in its most recent form demonstrates the capacity of the system to self-limit, to reproduce the conditions of its own survival through conscious interventions, and to plan—alongside the development of the capitalist productive forces—the limits

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<sup>635</sup> Karl Marx, 'Frammento sulle macchine', trans. by Renato Solmi, *Quaderni rossi*, 4, 1964, 288–300; Mario Tronti, 'Chapter 18: Italy', in *Karl Marx's Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy 150 Years Later*, ed. by Marcello Musto, trans. by Arianna Bove, *Frontiers of Political Economy*, 109 (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 229–32.

of such development (for example by planning the level of unemployment).<sup>636</sup>

Panzieri prefaced the 'Fragment on Machines' by warning against a technologically determinist reading of Marx. For the avoidance of doubt, he concluded by reiterating the point. 'In brief, Marxist thought has failed to grasp the fundamental character of modern-day capitalism, which lies in its capacity for salvaging the fundamental expression of the law of surplus value, i.e. planning, both at the level of the factory and at the social level.'<sup>637</sup>

Whatever relevance the *Grundrisse* retains today, raising a demand for full automation glosses over all this. The historic relationship between technological development and industrial unrest at Ford points to another issue with adopting such a demand. Instead of a tactical engagement in industrial politics, contesting management's use of technology while recognising the strategic agency of workers, we're left with a slogan divorced from all such practical concerns.

Fortunately perhaps, accelerationism is not the only example of a perspective today with a genealogical relationship with the politics of working-class autonomy. Others have also attempted to develop political practices for intervention in the

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<sup>636</sup> My own translation based on Raniero Panzieri, 'Surplus Value and Planning: Notes on the Reading of "Capital"', in *The Labour Process & Class Strategies*, trans. by Julian Bees, CSE Pamphlet, 1 (London: Stage 1, 1976), pp. 4–25 (pp. 20–21). The original reads: 'C'è diffusamente, semmai, in Marx, (si veda la parte finale del frammento dei Grundrisse pubblicato qui di seguito) una teoria della <<insostenibilità>> del capitalismo al suo massimo livello di sviluppo, allorché le forze produttive <<sovrabbondanti>> entrano in conflitto con la <<base ristretta>> del sistema, e la misurazione quantitativa del lavoro diventa un palese assurdo. Ma questa prospettiva rinvia immediatamente a un'altra questione: lo sviluppo del capitalismo nella sua forma recente dimostra la capacità del sistema ad <<autolimitarsi>>, a riprodurre con interventi consapevoli le condizioni della sua sopravvivenza, e a pianificare, con lo sviluppo capitalistico delle forze produttive, anche i limiti di questo sviluppo stesso (ad esempio, con la pianificazione di una quota di disoccupazione).' Raniero Panzieri, 'Plusvalore e pianificazione: Appunti di lettura del Capitale', *Quaderni rossi*, 4, 1964, 256–87 (pp. 285–86).

<sup>637</sup> Panzieri, 'Surplus Value and Planning', p. 21. The original reads: Accade così che al pensiero marxista sfugga, in generale, la caratteristica fondamentale dell'odierno capitalismo, che è nel recupero dell'espressione fondamentale della legge del plusvalore, il piano, dal livello di fabbrica al livello sociale. Panzieri, 'Plusvalore e pianificazione', p. 288.

workplace informed by this tendency. For instance, the Kolinko collective from the Rhine-Ruhr region of Germany began a call centre inquiry in 1999. This reflected disillusionment with the summit hopping of the anti-globalisation movement, which they saw as irrelevant to the everyday lives of activist themselves, as well as those of other workers. Such an approach set out to examine ‘the concrete conditions of exploitation and the prospects of a new class movement’, explicitly influenced by *Socialisme ou Barbarie* and *Quaderni rossi*.<sup>638</sup>

Over a two-year period Kolinko forged a number of transnational connections as indicated by references to reports in *Undercurrents*, an English publication sharing a similar perspective, on the 1999 British Telecom (BT) strike. This dispute was widely regarded at the time as the first call-centre strike in this country. Such transnational links extended beyond an exchange of information, aiming towards a collective common practice. Activists in Brighton adopted the name *Hotlines*, which was originally used by their German comrades, for leaflets that they produced and distributed during this dispute. While demonstrating a degree of continuity with previous workerist politics, Kolinko ultimately succeeded more in confronting other activists with the limitations of protesting international summits than in establishing an effective alternative practice.<sup>639</sup>

More recently the financial crisis of 2007 to 2008 and its ongoing aftermath focused wider attention on issues of economic power, the world of work and class relations. The online magazine *Viewpoint*, which emerged from the Occupy movement, dedicated an entire issue to the theme of workers’ inquiry. This included historical material from and analysis of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, Italian *operaismo*, and the French Maoist practice of *établissement*, which entailed an industrial turn by former-student intellectuals in the 1970s. These pieces appeared

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<sup>638</sup> Kolinko, *Hotlines: Call Centre, Inquiry, Communism* (Duisburg: Kolinko, 2002) <[https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e\\_lebuk.htm](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/kolinko/lebuk/e_lebuk.htm)> [accessed 5 September 2018].

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

alongside other material with a more contemporary focus, applying the methods and concepts to today's workplace.<sup>640</sup>

Such engagement displays greater continuity than accelerationism with the politics of working-class autonomy, both in terms of theory and practice. Questions remain about what lessons should be learned from autonomist theory about the relationship between the world of work and wider social relations though. In his comprehensive account of Italian autonomist Marxism, Steve Wright concluded that one of this tendency's main weaknesses consisted in a propensity to develop overarching conceptual categories. According to Wright, the '[m]ost damaging of all' was the *operaio sociale*. He took a more favourable view of the term *social factory*, which 'alluded to a significant rethinking of class composition', however. Wright also offered a positive assessment of the shift away from a 'too-narrow focus on [...] the immediate process of production [...] to examine the world beyond the factory walls', as a general trajectory within workerism and autonomist Marxism.<sup>641</sup>

Wright's analysis highlights the limitations of any politics focusing exclusively on the labour process in isolation from wider circuits of valorisation and social reproduction, processes involving both the state and unwaged labour. However welcome a recently renewed interest in workplace organising may be, distilling down the lessons of Italian workerism into a mere workplace inquiry would be mistaken. To do so would be particularly ironic today, when so much work clearly lies well beyond the factory gates of half a century ago. When making deliveries in the gig economy, for instance, the boundary between the site of production and the wider social field has become increasingly erased.

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<sup>640</sup> 'Workers' Inquiry', *Viewpoint Magazine*, 3, 2013  
<<https://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/30/issue-3-workers-inquiry/>> [accessed 14 March 2016].

<sup>641</sup> Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomist Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), pp. 224–25.

The history of how the politics of working-class autonomy intersected with labour unrest at Ford in Britain also highlights how too narrow a focus on the inquiry as a method could obscure what else has emerged from this tendency. True, aspects of such a method run throughout this history, from leaflets co-written by external militants and members of the workforce to the exchange of information within the EFWC. Yet, almost none of this was framed as a workers' inquiry as such. Moreover, the distinction drawn between strategy and tactics, the mode of analysis in terms of class composition and the practical approach to organising all have broader social relevance too.

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