

Visteon: when workers are forced to fight

When Visteon managers sacked the entire workforce with six minutes' notice they expected the workers to walk away heads bowed. Instead, they had unleashed a bitter two-month battle of occupations, roof-top protests, 24-hour pickets, lobbies and demonstrations. PAULA MITCHELL writes on the importance of this dispute to the changing consciousness of workers in Britain.

AT THE END of March, Visteon UK went into administration. Six hundred workers in Belfast, Basildon and Enfield were sacked with six minutes' notice. They were left to claim statutory redundancy payments. Even workers with over 30 years' service would only have got about £9,000, most a lot less. Their pensions, those of ex-Visteon workers in Swansea and retirees, went into the Pension Protection Fund, which would result in reduced payments.

Meanwhile, Visteon UK executives saved their pensions and fat-cat salaries through being employed by their own Visteon Engineering Services set up prior to administration. They expected the workers would walk meekly away.

But, as Basildon Unite convener, Frank Jepson, explained in *The Socialist* (13 May): "The Irish Visteon workers in Belfast took a proactive stance, refusing to leave the factory. At first our guys were shocked, because they had probably trusted the employer too much and believed that Visteon UK directors were trying to make the business viable. When it happened the guys were on their knees, their guts were kicked out. Also, Kevin Nolan (the Enfield convener) and myself were inexperienced. The place was covered with security guards. I think there wasn't enough confidence at that point to make a stand. But that evening Kevin and I spoke to each other, we rang round when everyone had had time to digest what had happened and planned to come back the next morning, 10am, to storm both the plants at the same time".

Thus began a seven-week struggle, drawing to a close on 18 May, as the workers exited the plants having won a victory, a substantial financial package from Ford, via Visteon. Militant class action

THE FUNDAMENTAL LESSON of the Visteon struggle is that militant action can win. The workers did not walk away. They defied the law, occupied their plants and, in the case of Basildon and Enfield, mounted 24-hour pickets. They protested at Ford showrooms and prepared to picket Ford plants. Mass action, backed up by solidarity from other sections of the working class, brought the mighty Ford Motor Company to its knees. As Frank Jepson says: "Our victory shows that if you're determined to make a stand you can beat the big companies. Six hundred workers beat Ford and Visteon. That's massive, a real David and Goliath".

As with the Lindsey oil refinery strikes earlier in the year, the initiative came from the workers themselves, not the trade union officials. At the beginning, many of the workers

expressed the view that the British working class is too slow to move, accepting attacks without fighting back. 'We should be like the French', they would say.

In a context in which thousands of jobs are disappearing every day, apparently without a fight, it is understandable that workers may think there is some kind of British disease that prevents the working class from fighting. The reality is that workers in Britain have faced decades of neo-liberal attacks. Rather than 'take it lying down', they fought tremendous battles against the brutal policies of wage restraint, job cuts, privatisation, the decimation of manufacturing, anti-trade union legislation and so on through the 1970s and 1980s. But increasingly through the 1980s and 1990s, trade union leaders moved to the right, preferring to manage defeat rather than lead a fight. Anti-trade union legislation also held back struggle, partly in the minds of workers themselves, but mainly because it has been used by the leadership as a reason not to engage in struggle.

This is particularly so in the global car industry, which faced over-production and over-capacity even before this current economic crisis. Mergers, takeovers and outsourcing have been met by union leaders with strategies such as 'concession bargaining', accepting cuts in wages and worsening conditions as the price of saving jobs. Visteon shows, however, that no amount of concessions will save a factory if the bosses are determined to close it. Visteon workers had been told by their national officials to accept a three-tier workforce, a move from three to two shifts (losing shift money) and other 'efficiencies' to save plants that the bosses had already planned to close.

If it were down to the determination of the workers themselves, any idea that British workers take it lying down would simply not exist. But, with a few exceptions, like the PCS civil service union and RMT rail and transport union, the actions of the union leaders over years have undermined workers' confidence to fight, or that they would be supported by their union. Through their actions, the Visteon workers have adopted the militancy of French workers. This lesson will be learned by others who face similar attacks.

Management double dealing

VISTEON WAS SPUN off by Ford in 2000. The workers were promised Ford 'mirrored' terms and conditions, and a job for life. Throughout their time working for Visteon their ID cards still said Ford. Many of the men and women had worked for Ford and then Visteon for 25 years and longer. While at Visteon they had received Ford 30 years' service commemorative vases. But when they were cast out with nothing, Ford bosses claimed that they had no obligation to them! Visteon, they said, was an entirely independent company.

This is typical of the methods used by major companies to shift around profits and avoid obligations. Visteon bosses pretended to the workforce that they were doing all they could to make the plants viable. The reality is that they were never intended to be. It was a device to slash costs at the expense of the workforce. As Ford components plants, these factories had been profitable. Suddenly, as Visteon, they were not, despite improvements in productivity, as the prices paid by Ford for the components were deliberately low.

Profits from Visteon UK were hived-off to other parts of Visteon Corporation, such as the Visteon Customer Technology Centre up the road from the Basildon plant. An allegedly independent company, it was another way of siphoning off profits to make it look like Visteon UK was making a loss. As the workers themselves commented, this was akin to money laundering, except it was all legal.

Attacks on workers' pay and conditions followed, with two- and then three-tier contracts for new workers. They demanded that the ex-Ford workers break their mirrored contracts. They planned to shut down in higher-paid countries and outsource the work to low-cost Eastern Europe. During this dispute, the workers found evidence that the management had discussed closure and outsourcing as early as 2006. Yet, up to the last minute, the bosses were still demanding concessions from them.

In Swansea, four years ago, a new shop stewards committee was elected, with Socialist Party member Rob Williams as convener, to fight the relentless attacks on pay and conditions. In 2008, after balloting for strike action, Visteon workers won a 5% pay rise, which also applied to those employed immediately after Visteon was spun off from Ford. Successful resistance to attempts to remove Ford contracts and the lack of any comparable alternative employment in West Belfast, when combined with decisive local leadership, gave the Belfast workers the confidence to resist in March. The developing strategy

A PRIMARY CONCERN of the workers was to control the plants, to prevent them being reopened by another company, or machinery and components being removed. While the workers were in occupation, they controlled the plants. In Belfast, this continued throughout. Police, security and the administrators were driven away and the workers secured the building. This was the strongest basis from which to conduct the fight. As well as giving the workers control over the assets and plant, it also enabled high levels of organisation, with daily mass meetings and shop stewards committee meetings three times a day.

In Enfield, the workers occupied for ten days until driven out by court rulings. In Basildon, the occupation ended early under pressure from the police. Round-the-clock pickets were then mounted to prevent anything moving. Particularly important in Basildon, once the workers were on the gates, were actions to keep everybody together and boost morale. They held a protest at the Visteon Customer Technology Centre, a family day, a demonstration through Basildon and another day of action in Basildon town centre.

The workers also realised the importance of building support among the local community. Posters went up. They leafleted and collected money at local workplaces, stations and supermarkets. Workers at the tractor plant in Basildon, for example, recognised that they could be next, and collected hundreds of pounds in support.

Visteon workers wanted to pressure Ford to intervene to stop the sackings. Successful protests were organised at Ford showrooms, some of which were shut down for the

duration of the protest. Most importantly, they appealed to Ford workers to support them. Socialist Party members from the start emphasised that winning solidarity from Ford workers would be crucial to forcing Ford to act.

The Visteon battle coincided with the 25th anniversary of the miners' strike, and some of the lessons of that historic strike were discussed on the picket lines. One of the main lessons was the importance of solidarity. References were made to the mass pickets of mines that were still working in order to bring them out.

Visteon workers understandably thought Ford workers – some of whom had worked at Visteon – should walk out in support. Of course, had that happened on a large scale it would have been superb. However, we did not agree with the demand in leaflets of other organisations that any individual Ford worker who wanted to support Visteon workers should walk out. In the current climate of massive job losses, following years in which the leadership had failed to fight job cuts and short-time working at Ford itself, to expect Ford workers to suddenly take illegal action in support of Visteon workers was a big ask. The working class cannot just be turned on and off like a tap.

How to win that solidarity was the key issue. We put forward the strategy of calling for the blacking of Visteon parts. If any worker was victimised for doing so, the Unite union should call them out on strike. This would make mass action by Ford workers more realisable.

The Unite leadership invited Visteon conveners to a national meeting with Ford conveners. While that meeting agreed a resolution to support Visteon workers, exactly how this was to be done was not addressed. Later, after a derisory offer from Visteon was rejected and Ford bosses still denied any obligation, the national Unite leadership organised a meeting of conveners and officials, out of which came the plan to picket Ford's Bridgend plant in Wales.

Yet, as with the miners' strike, which others referred to romantically without carefully drawing the full lessons, we realised that simply turning up and picketing may not be enough. In discussions, it was raised that the workers should approach Ford conveners to ask for meetings with stewards and members, to explain the case so that Ford workers understood what was at stake and why they were being asked to take action. We also argued that the Unite leadership should take the lead, going to Ford plants and assuring the workers of their full support.

It was the threat of picketing Ford Bridgend that brought Ford management to the table. The leaders of all three plants agreed with the approach of preparing the ground and met the convener and stewards at Bridgend. Frank explains: "We wanted to get the Ford conveners on board to open the door to meetings with the stewards and workers. The pickets were our trump card. We didn't want to do it without getting full support of the Bridgend workers. Kevin Nolan and I went to meet the Bridgend convener and senior stewards to lay the groundwork and to plan it. That was absolutely the right thing to do. It was very productive; the stewards were definitely on board".

The importance of leadership

UNITE OFFICIALS VISITED the plants in the first couple of days and assured the workers of their full support. However, on a day-to-day basis, the workers felt that the union did not give the support they expected. Many at Basildon and Enfield felt that the practical assistance and advice that should have been provided by the union were actually provided by socialist supporters. One of the reasons for the level of support for Rob Williams, sacked convener of the ex-Visteon plant at Swansea, is the role he has played in Visteon and in the car industry in general. In the vacuum of leadership, Rob has offered not just general support but specific guidance to workers fighting attacks, illustrating the role that even just one Socialist Party member can play, not only in one workplace, but across an industry. The national officials, hiding behind anti-trade union legislation, were not prepared to come out and lead action. But the Visteon convenors and key shop stewards were able to lead the way.

In periods of frustration, some of the Visteon workers asked, 'Why do we stay in the union?' Some expressed the idea of setting up their own union. Other workers, unfamiliar with what a militant union could be like, and unable at this stage to see how a fight to transform the unions could take place, blamed the government rather than the union leadership for their situation. The Visteon struggle has shown that pressure from below can force union leaders to fight. In the face of such brutality by the employer, basic class anger was stirred in this battle. A massacre of jobs is taking place, and union leaders cannot be seen to be completely impotent in the face of this onslaught if they are to maintain their positions at the tops of the unions.

A revolt is brewing in the trade unions and workplaces. Stewards who are unwilling to fight will be pushed aside by a newer, younger generation. Visteon is an expression of this. The convenors of both Basildon and Enfield were new and inexperienced but were prepared to struggle and learn as they did so.

Saving jobs

WHAT THE VISTEON workers have won is a tremendous achievement. The issue of the pensions is still unresolved, to be taken up by a pensions lawyer. And, as the workers well know, the jobs have been lost. In this recession, it will be very difficult for them to find work on similar pay and conditions. The loss of jobs potentially brings with it the loss of homes, cars and lifestyles, and the loss of the collective organisation and camaraderie of the workplace. There is also the loss of the skills of the workforce, which society needs, now thrown on the scrapheap.

The workers at Belfast fought to keep the plant open. But, at this stage, the overall majority of the workers at the three plants did not feel able to fight on to save the jobs. Many, particularly at Belfast, thought their plants were viable. But they were relatively small workplaces and the struggle for jobs is at an early stage. The workers also did not clearly see how the jobs could be saved.

The Socialist Party demanded that Ford should take the plants back but, if they were not prepared to do so, that the government should take them over. Workers were sympathetic to this idea but did not see it as achievable. However, this battle is at the start of a process. Examples of similar battles, while well-known (Lindsey, Waterford Crystal, Prisme), are few at the moment. But the Visteon dispute is now a factor in encouraging other workers to struggle. Corus workers in Redcar, facing the closure of their factory with the loss of 2,000 jobs, are looking at Visteon for inspiration. At a later stage, as the spectre of mass unemployment hits home, further and more widespread battles could take place. In the context of more heightened struggle, the demand to nationalise companies will be seen to be more achievable and will be taken up by workers more widely.

The demand to nationalise the factories under democratic workers' control and management, especially in industries like the car industry, will need to be linked to a programme to switch to alternative production. The valuable skills of those workers are not limited to making cars. As part of a plan of production they could be switched to other products that society needs. Workers at Enfield, for example, raised the idea that their factory, with plastic moulding equipment used to make dashboards, could be retooled to make wheelie bins.

A few months ago, the majority of Visteon workers would never have imagined that they would occupy or picket their factories. They did not see themselves as militants and readily admit that they had ignored demonstrations and pickets. Conditions forced them to fight.

They now say they will never walk past a picket again. Several of the workers want to continue to offer solidarity to other workers in struggle, and to take part in the newly-formed united left in Unite to play a part in fighting to transform the union. The workers are angry that the Labour government has maintained the Tory anti-trade union laws, and blame Labour for the ease with which workers in Britain can be sacked, demanding changes in employment law.

For the majority, this has also led them to conclude that New Labour is no different from the Tories. Many think that Unite should stop funding New Labour and agree with the idea that they should use that money to campaign for a new workers' party. When others have argued that workers should join New Labour to try to change it, many rightly respond that it is too late for that. There has been a good deal of interest in the No2EU-Yes to Democracy initiative, with the conveners at Basildon and Enfield standing as No2EU candidates in the euro elections.

The vicious actions of the Visteon bosses turned these workers' lives upside down. As a consequence, their ideas have changed dramatically as well. But the Visteon bosses are no different from their counterparts throughout Britain. And the Visteon workers are not either.

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