

# Ford conspires against Visteon workers

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At certain times the relationship between capitalism and labour is spelt out so that no-one can mistake it. Such a time occurred during a recent tour that I was given of the occupied Visteon factory in Belfast.

I was shown an assembly line for Electronic Throttle Bodies. Beside the station was a rack of 20 aluminium bodies. Fifteen had been assembled and five remained. Shortly after 12 noon the operator, who had been employed in the plant for 30 years, was called to the canteen by financial administrators. He was informed that his contract was terminated and was given six minutes to leave the building.

The workers refused and occupied the factory and that made it possible for their story to be told.

It's not a story of unavoidable business failure. In fact, it's a story of conspiracy by some of the richest people on the planet aimed at ordinary workers.

Some years ago the ownership of the Belfast plant was transferred to Visteon. No money changed hands. The plant continued to make parts for Ford and Ford subsidiaries. It was a pretty transparent attempt to avoid meeting contractual obligations on pay and pensions. Approached by suspicious workers, the company signed a document giving a cast-iron declaration that they would honour all Ford contracts, no matter what the circumstances.

The new Visteon company then built a small factory in South Africa. It declared that the European plants were losing money. When an efficiency-drive put the Belfast plant in profit, Visteon reduced the notional book-keeping price of the components and backdated the reduction by one year. At a stroke of the pen the factory was insolvent and the administrators were called in.

This is part of a pattern to be found all over the world. Not only are jobs and salaries cut, pensions that the workers paid into for years suddenly vanish as ownership of assets are transferred. In any other field of activity this would be called theft. Here the State simply shrugs its shoulders.

The workers occupation was met with many acts of spontaneous solidarity. Workers from a recent occupation in Waterford travelled to the factory. Local shops and restaurants donated food. Children from a local primary school donated Easter eggs. From all sides of the trade union movement and from the political parties came expressions of concern.

Unfortunately workers in the position of the Visteon workers, reaching for support from traditional trade union and political leaderships are in the position of someone falling from a precipice who grabs a branch only to find it rotten.

The main union involved is Unite. It led the Waterford occupation to a less than inspiring ending. It persuaded Enfield workers to end their occupation 'to aid negotiations' – ignoring the reality that without the occupation there would be no negotiations and that control of the factory is the main weapon in the hands of the workers. It opposed a decision by Belfast workers to picket local Ford dealerships. Most striking of all, it is not paying strike pay.

This is significant at two levels. Although there are many resources available at branch level across many unions, the Visteon workers have paid dues for decades and deserve support now. Much more fundamentally it means that the occupation remains unofficial. The union takes a back seat to avoid the possibility of legal action and the workers are used to shield the union rather than the other way around.

One other unfortunate outcome lies in the area of demands. Many workers would like to keep their jobs, but negotiations are centred on pensions. When you are in dispute with a global giant like Ford there is no real advantage in lowering your sights - the battle is just as big. Unfortunately union bureaucracies tend to start negotiating in the middle of the stairs and then climb downwards. Usually the process ends not far from the bottom rung.

The statements of support from political parties sound much more encouraging, but in fact all they have agreed to do is to lobby Ford/Visteon on the workers behalf. Gerry Adams declared that Ford had a moral duty to meet its obligations. That's certainly true, but the workers account makes it clear that the factory closure and the repudiation of workers rights are part of a long-term strategy. Lobbying is highly unlikely to shift the company and any concessions would be minor shifts designed to avoid negative publicity. The fact that Visteon are continuing with court actions and are now planning the removal of tools from the Enfield factory tells us everything we need to know about how seriously they take the lobbying process.

In fact workers should be asking hard questions of the politicians. Ford's actions are essentially a theft. Is there any plan to punish them? To prevent further similar thefts? An economic plan to provide employment in a situation where transnationals move production to drive down wages?

West Belfast especially was given pledges that the new dispensation would mean the end to decades of deprivation and new manufacturing jobs. How are these pledges to be met?

The battle against Ford can be won, but it is an immensely difficult task. The fight will require absolute clarity and determination. It must be led by the workers themselves and it must aim to gain the support of Ford workers across the globe. It must look for active support from working people in all walks of life. It should seek democratic control of the unions and demand that the needs of members come first. It should demand from politicians that public money is made available to continue production at the factory, especially in an era of bail-outs to the banks and the ultra-rich.

But the battle should be fought. If these workers lose their rights who is there within the Ford empire whose jobs, wages or conditions are safe? If the whole economic strategy of the Stormont administration is to ease the path of the transnationals and tempt them here how do they react when they cheat the workers? What is plan B when they pull out to look for cheaper wages elsewhere?