



VISTEON

Workers' occupations take on the bosses

Eleanor Davies reviews the recent struggle by the Visteon workers and looks at the implications of it for the rest of the motor industry

ON 31 March 2009 600 Visteon workers in Belfast, Basildon and Enfield were given six minutes notice to quit. No redundancy deal was on offer and the pension scheme was wound up. New Labour, new recession – same old P45.

Of course all of this was, to coin the MPs' favourite phrase, "within the rules". But the rules are rigged. And the workers decided to play by a different set. Belfast Visteon workers seized control of their plant. On hearing the news from Belfast, Enfield and Basildon went back to their plants. There was a combine-wide occupation.

Legal pressure and state harassment forced the Enfield and Basildon workers out of their occupations. Nevertheless, the strike continued and after seven weeks bitter struggle, with Belfast still occupied and Enfield still picketing, the workers forced the bosses to grant a generous financial package. On day one they were out the door with nothing. After seven weeks of struggle they at least secured a degree of financial compensation that would help them and their families survive. This they got by fighting back instead of sitting back and accepting the bosses' right to play with their lives.

The workers sent out a message to those of us who want to fight pay cuts, redundancies, school closures and the privatisation of public services. By standing up and fighting back with courage, initiative and creativity we can get results.

Visteon is a sorry tale of murkiness and shady dealings. The company was established by the multinational US-based car producer Ford in 1997 and spun off in 2000. Ford remained Visteon's main customer and the links between it and Visteon are strong. On 15 May 2009 Ford took over responsibility for \$264 million worth of Visteon loans according to the document "Visteon Corp 8K". This document states:

"Ford is the company's largest customer and the company provides various information technology, personnel and other services, and leases personnel to Ford and certain of its affiliates."

Despite this obvious link, Ford tried to wash their hands of the Visteon workers, initially refusing to take part in any negotiations or take any responsibility for redundancy payments or pensions. It claimed that Visteon was a completely separate entity despite the fact that Ford set the company up and is its major customer. All over the Belfast Visteon plant there are crates marked with the Ford logo. Just last year Sean McCaffery, a worker at the Belfast plant, received an engraved commemoration vase from the company for 30 years service with . . . Ford. Now the bosses don't want to know.

In February 2009, just weeks before Visteon workers were told their company had gone into administration and their jobs were gone, Steve Gawne, Chief executive of Visteon UK, set up a company called Automotive Products. This is registered at the Visteon Basildon plant address and workers are convinced that he will take the machinery currently used by Visteon for his new company and re-employ workers – but on worse terms and conditions.

This puts the redundancy deal into perspective. It is a considerable advance on the original notice to quit. But it still means the jobs have gone and any new ones will not be as good. This explains anger amongst workers, especially in Belfast where the occupation of the plant held firm throughout the dispute, over how the deal had been negotiated, how workers had been categorised and how the whole thing had been communicated to them by the union leadership. For example, Enfield and Basildon voted two days before Belfast. As the workers in Belfast said, "It doesn't matter which way we vote now, the deal is done."

When we visited the Belfast plant, during the weekend of the ballot, the atmosphere was one of tempered anger. The militants understood that because they had maintained the control of the Belfast plant they were in a far stronger position to continue the fight than their fellow workers at Enfield and Basildon. But they felt betrayed by the national Unite union leadership. That leadership

made clear from the outset that they weren't fighting to preserve jobs. They just wanted to save face by getting better redundancy terms.

On the Friday before Belfast held their ballot Unite issued a press release declaring a victory and announcing that workers would receive up to £80,000 in pay-outs. This was a ringing endorsement of the leadership's negotiating skills but it didn't save a single job. It was won not as a result of Tony Woodley's bargaining prowess but because the Belfast workers had seized their plant and other workers had struck.

This explains why workers in the Belfast plant – 34 of whom voted against – saw the deal as a partial victory. This is what John Maguire from the Belfast occupation said after the ballot:

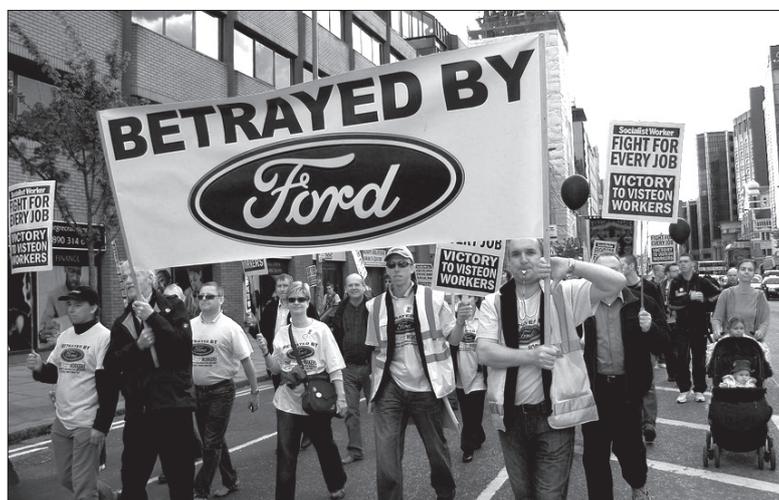
“From where we were a month ago this has to be seen as a victory. Together with Basildon and Enfield we took on two massive multinationals who had walked away without giving us our statutory notice and left us with only statutory redundancy entitlements. We have forced them to come up with a £40 million settlement, which at least provides the workforce with a financial cushion while they look for jobs. But in the overall sense we are far from happy. This is a viable factory, which we wanted to keep open. These are not our jobs, they belong to the next generation. If we had been asked to sell these jobs we would never have done so, not at any price.”

The Belfast occupation

The combined pressure of the courts and the Unite leadership coerced Enfield into accepting the ultimatum and leaving their plant after they had originally occupied it. But after the event the workers knew this was a mistake and that they were in a weaker bargaining position because they were outside the gates. Management quickly moved in some heavy-handed security to protect their property and undermine the workers' action.

Belfast was very different. The workers never left their plant, they took control and forced the management and the administrators to leave the building. When the administrators arrived on 31 March and told the workers that they had been made redundant and could they please leave they were greeted with a chorus of “we're not leaving.” After a quick meeting the decision to occupy was taken and enforced. The plant was seized, secured and placed under workers' control. The gates were sealed and the CCTV cameras were disabled. The workers escorted the management team off the plant. The administrators stuck it out without food for another 36 hours, but did not have the stomach for a long fight. They realised their efforts were futile and decided to leave. The security staff hung on until their shift was over and then left.

From the outset the workers in Belfast knew that they had to maintain the occupation to keep up the pressure on Ford, to win support from the local community and to organise solidarity action in other Ford factories. They ran the occupation with military precision and a rota was established for various practical activities: cooking, cleaning, and staffing the gate. The fridges and freezers were stocked up with food and a notice board encour-



Belfast Visteon workers march on May Day Photo: Kirstie Paton

aged people to come forward with ideas and suggestions on how to sustain the occupation and ensure that morale was maintained. For instance, one rule about no alcohol was supplemented with the warning that the media were sniffing around and that they could be caught on camera. The occupation was run in an open and democratic manner, which meant that everyone was involved and informed.

We visited the plant on the Mayday weekend and the level of discipline and organisation was inspiring. Under a regime of workers' control a strong sense of solidarity and accountability had developed and people discovered their own strengths and skills in areas they didn't think possible. Men who had previously been quiet on the factory floor came into their own as they had the opportunity to express and exchange political ideas on everything

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from the day-to-day running of the occupation through the negotiations with the Visteon bosses to how to solve the world recession.

A routine of daily meetings was established through which workers could communicate with the convenor, deputy convenor and shop stewards. A wall covered in press cuttings was set up and messages of support were all over the place. The workers welcomed visits and support from political parties including the Socialist Party, the SWP and Sinn Fein – Gerry Adams came and offered his support. For every visitor a medal was made with the date of the occupation and their name on it.

The workers galvanised public support by making banners to hang from the plant. They set up a picket called "The Cocktail Bar" where the motorway runs past the plant with placards asking motorists for their support. Someone told us how a driver pulled over and jumped out of his car to hand the surprised pickets £80.

Respect for and maintenance of the machinery was an important routine in the occupation. On a tour of the plant accompanied by two of the workers we saw machines and desks which had been left exactly as they were on 31 March – half made parts, part drunk mugs of tea, paperwork left across a desk. Billy kept pointing out as we went round that each "station" represented someone's job.

One of the machines, which was used for giving precise measurements of the parts, is worth over £2m. The workers ensured that under no circumstances was the machinery or plant to be abused, by being broken up or stolen. Apparently there was a case early on where someone tried to take something out of the plant but he was quickly dealt with by the rest of the occupation and asked to leave.

The factory is in the middle of a West Belfast housing estate and the local community understood the significance for their lives of the imminent closure of this plant. Local businesses donated food and drinks and organisations and individuals gave donations of money. Over the Easter weekend a local primary school came by and donated Easter eggs at the gate. This was a case of the workers united, but instead of taking this as the cue for extending the fight to defend jobs throughout Ford UK, the union leadership refused to issue the clear call for solidarity action, the one thing that could have bolstered the Belfast occupation, boosted the action at Enfield and Basildon and encouraged resistance to job cuts throughout the car industry.

Solidarity action

Solidarity action was needed from workers in other Ford plants if the dispute was to win more than the enhanced redundancy terms. The strikers understood this and made attempts to establish close links with convenors at Southampton and Bridgend.

Bridgend makes the Fiesta engine, which is one of Ford's best selling cars, which currently has a 12 week waiting list. Threatening Bridgend with closure would have had an enormous economic impact on Ford.

As Frank Jepson explained, "All this was leaked so that Ford would know what we were planning. And it worked. Fleming [Ford President Europe] asked to talk. Less than a week after saying he had no obligation, he wanted to talk. The pickets at Bridgend were postponed. 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 convenor and senior stewards to lay the groundwork and to plan it . . . Woodley [Unite leader] was due to visit the pickets on the Wednesday but we got called into the national office [for talks]."

The decision to picket Bridgend was what finally brought Ford to the negotiating table and led to the deal. And while

a result was won, the chance to score an even greater victory wasn't. That greater victory could have been the launch of a serious fight across Ford to stop job cuts and closures. According to the BBC:

"Five hundred posts have been cut in Swaythling. A further 350 job losses will be spread across the company's remaining UK sites in Basildon, Brentwood and Dunton in Essex, Daventry in Northamptonshire, Halewood on Merseyside and Bridgend in south Wales.

Most of the 1,000 workers at the Transit plant already face a cut in earnings after the two-shift working day was replaced with a single shift. The total layoffs represent nearly 7% of Ford's UK workforce of 12,900 – with almost half of the Southampton factory's staff of 1,100 affected."

The Visteon strike could and should have been used as the starting point to resist these plans. Delegations of Visteon workers could have explained what was at stake, how they were fighting and why others should join them. They could have sparked a widespread fightback – had the union leadership not decided to confine their struggle to one for better redundancy terms.

The trade union leadership

Tony Woodley – joint leader of Unite with Derek Simpson – was the main official involved in the Visteon dispute and in the talks that ended it. Woodley won the leadership of the old TGWU (now part of Unite) on a left wing platform that promised an organising agenda to revive the union.

He is a good speaker and has an easy rapport with many of the union's leading rank and file activists. His base of support, which he has renewed by speaking out in support of workers in struggle, is solid. He has criticised Labour more forthrightly than his joint leader, Simpson, and has presented himself as very much a field campaigner rather than a desk bureaucrat. While this image explains his support, his track record does not match with the carefully cultivated militant reputation. For example, he drew back from espousing solidarity action with the Gate Gourmet workers at British Airways by other TGWU members in the industry, leaving the strikers isolated at a point where their struggle had a real opportunity of winning because action was spreading spontaneously. He cited the anti-union laws as an excuse for pulling the plug on this 2005 strike.

In Liverpool in 2007-08 he pledged total support for Rolls Royce workers whose plant was threatened with closure. The plant is now closed and, as in Visteon, a militant and well organised workforce has been dispersed with even leading stewards expressing dismay at the manner in which the union treated them. After all, on a demo one winter Saturday Woodley gave a "struggle or death" style speech to the workforce. On the following Tuesday he struck a deal at a meeting with Gordon Brown and the Rolls Royce bosses that saw the plant closed and the campaign to keep it open wound up by the union.

What would this militant by word, but mediator by action, do faced with the occupation and strikes at Visteon in 2009? Tony Woodley did back the planned picket at

INTERVIEW: VISTEON BELFAST

“Our strength is staying here. Everybody agreed”

Talk me through the day it happened?

Most of us came into work as usual, Tuesday morning. People came in and said they had seen two managers come in with bodyguards. Everybody started getting suspicious – why would they need bodyguards? There was nothing happening as far as we were concerned. There was extra security put on as well.

Then someone mentioned they had looked outside and they noticed there were people who they assumed were administrators coming in. At that point there was word sent round to everybody that we should meet at 1pm in the canteen here. We all came in, sat down and 15 minutes later a person I didn't know came in and stood at the front, at the side of two managers. They introduced themselves. He said, “I am John Hanson from KPMG administrators. Our company has been drawn by Visteon UK and as of now Visteon UK is liquidated.”

He denied any knowledge of Ford. We said we were Ford employees, but he said “I know nothing about that.” That's when the debate started. We said “We're not moving until we get this sorted out.” Then he said “My colleagues at the back have paperwork for you as you are leaving, take a sheet

each and you can read it and get back to us if you need any answers.” Somebody said “We're not leaving.” People thought maybe that's not a bad idea. John Maguire called for a meeting. He said to the managers, “Can you leave us to talk between ourselves and get things sorted.”

This is the whole plant?

Everybody. We all talked between ourselves and decided that's it, we can't leave. We'll be too weak if we leave. Our strength is staying here. Everybody agreed.

After about half an hour people realised what had to be done. The place was secure. The managers were in their office, bodyguards with them. The doors we thought might get locked were taken off their hinges then the front gate was secured. We all went down to the gate. The two managers and the finance guy left with their bodyguards. The administrators stayed. Later that evening the administrators, about nine of them and two bosses stayed until the next morning. We said once you leave here that's it. It was the same with security as well. We said once your shift finishes, we're not going to throw you off the premises, but once you leave, stay off.

Once you'd got the place secure and you knew they couldn't get back in

what did you do then?

From then on we realised we had to get public support so we had a lot of banners made up. The first week we hardly stopped making banners. People realised it was a focal point. It just broke up into wee groups. Every wee group was doing different things. There were people securing the gate and others were saying “What can I do?” and “Let's make banners up here.” Anything that needed doing. There was nobody actually leaving. I'd say to John “We need this.” “Right that's a good idea. We'll do this.”

The press were here in a matter of hours. One of you rang them? Maguire called them?

BBC local news. BBC world service, they were all here within hours. They came in with cameras and stuff. The newspapers appeared as well. It was crazy. We had to get a grasp on talking to them, not a committee, but good communicators, people who had an in-depth of knowledge of what people's aspirations were. If the wrong message gets out to the media, if somebody says the wrong thing, it undermines everything we're trying to do.

Eleanor Davies spoke to Marty Avery, John Campbell and Sam Rosbotham

Bridgend. But his goal in giving the militants a nod and a wink was to strengthen his negotiating position. The bosses were tipped off about the plans and suddenly the top brass were inviting Woodley to talk.

Woodley had needed the threat of some action from the rank and file to use as a bargaining chip. But he wanted to retain control of that chip. He never wanted to see it become a starting point for widespread industrial action to defend every job across the combine. His strategy is not based on mobilising action to bring the bosses to their knees. It is based on using action to bring the bosses to the table.

Faced with the current jobs massacre Simpson and Woodley have decided that the key to salvaging credibility for the unions is to force the bosses into granting generous redundancy deals at workplace level while trying to get

the Labour government to “invest in manufacturing” at the national level. The first part involves backing action, like Visteon and the recent Lindsey strike, on the quiet. The second part involves organising or supporting demonstrations such as the G20 protest and the recent Unite march for jobs in the West Midlands to let the government know that Unite is serious in its demands.

But both elements of this strategy dictate that widespread industrial action explicitly around the defence of the right to work – including illegal action such as occupations, strikes without ballots, turfing out managers and administrators and spreading the action through secondary picketing – has at best, a subordinate role (when the workers go for it regardless of what the officials say) and at worst no role at all. Better to lobby the government than to batter

the bosses appears to be the Woodley/Simpson mantra. But redundancy deals don't save jobs. One of the reasons Visteon Belfast workers were so determined to fight to keep their jobs and to keep the plant open is because they are not just their jobs; these are the jobs of the next generation. As one worker put it, "This is not my job to give away."

Rank and file action

But this spirit of rank and file rebellion poses a problem for the union leaders. It threatens their strategy of piecemeal and incremental improvement won through "their negotiating skills" and through the strength of "their leadership". After all, if the truth gets out that the bosses will only ever negotiate on our terms if we are prepared to impose those terms on them through our own strength, this challenges not only the strategy but the entire purpose of trade union bureaucrats. This explains why Woodley was willing to give the odd nod and a wink to the Visteon workers but was mainly concerned to control and conclude the dispute – not spread it.

Woodley knew that he did not have that much influence over the Belfast workers – partly to do with the political situation in Belfast. At the Visteon plant in West Belfast, in Gerry Adams' constituency, workers have a political outlook forged by their experience of the war against British imperialism. This led to the degree of determination that maintained the occupation and it was this determination that forced the bosses to come up with new offer.

Belfast took the lead and Enfield and Basildon swiftly joined the fight. They didn't limit their fight to a legal battle – they circumvented the law and took direct unofficial action. But this action did not spread throughout Ford. And Unite did not try to spread it. Instead they began to put pressure on Enfield and Basildon. Following court rulings against the action union officials went into the plant at Enfield and advised the workers that they should leave their occupation.

This was crucial in isolating Belfast, and ensuring that its internal strength was insufficient to win back the jobs. The Belfast workers needed the weight of the union behind them, spreading the action, not curtailing it. As one worker put it, "I hope this has woken people up in higher positions in the union that they have a responsibility to get on the ground and fight with groups of people like us, not leave us for three weeks. They need to understand this proves there is a will in the trade union movement to fight. There is a lack of leadership to mobilise a membership to fight. That needs to be addressed."

Any attempt to spread the action was hampered by the union bureaucracy. Visteon workers couldn't even get on to the shop floor to discuss joint action with other Ford workers. The general strategy – of pushing the government for subsidies in return for pay freezes and short time working – was prevailing in the car plants where the fear of job losses was growing by the day. Yet far from strengthening the union's position, this has emboldened the employers. This was quickly demonstrated by the victimisation of Unite convenor, Rob Williams, at Linamar (another former Ford operation) at the Swansea plant. The victimisation of a leading militant is always the prelude to a wider attack on the workforce.

Scenting the possibility of using Belfast and the potential of a picket on Bridgend to get a deal the Belfast leadership was isolated during the negotiations. In Belfast this meant that when the vote came around the workers felt that they had been presented with a done deal even though their own rank and file leaders had not been party to agreeing it.

Bureaucracy's obstacle was further strengthened by the Ford workers' lack of confidence and fear of losing their own jobs. At first Woodley was forced to support the secondary action but in the end the rank and file didn't have the networks in place and they couldn't call Woodley's bluff. What the Visteon workers found was that they can't challenge the bureaucracy in a political vacuum – they couldn't go round the bureaucracy because their ability to organise is hampered by the union bureaucracy. The workers in Belfast felt betrayed by their leadership. They told us they felt were fighting on two fronts: Visteon bosses and the Unite leadership in the form of Roger Madison and Tony Woodley:

"I think the leadership of the union was surprised by the element of fight. I don't think they've won a trade union dispute in the last number of years . . . I get fed up when we go to union meetings and ask for help and they say 'let's do a collection'. Collections are good but I'm a trade unionist and if I wanted to put into a collection I can collect myself.

"I expect the union to fight with their feet. I hope the community will mobilise and do collections to help us. The problem here is our politicians have been very good but politicians lobby. The leaders of our union seemed to be lobbying too. Union leaders should fight for justice for members and that's the problem I have. I hope the leadership have learned a lesson that the people under them are ready to fight for justice and rights for all workers. This trade union needs to start fighting."

THE REDUNDANCY TERMS

THE REDUNDANCY deal places the workers into three categories:

- Mirrored Ford employees (those who had been transferred from Ford at the time of the Visteon spin-out)
- New hire Visteon employees
- CCR (cost competitive rate employees)

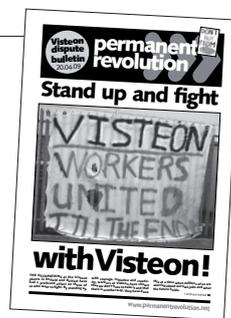
Everyone is to receive one week's pay for every year of service (1.5 weeks if aged over 41), 12 weeks pay in lieu of notice – statutory redundancy or 52 weeks payment (26 weeks if CCR)

For the former Ford workers the figure will reflect the pay rise they were awarded under the terms of

the previous Ford contract.

The deal did not include pensions. Visteon claim that they are on the verge of bankruptcy and that the pension fund is vulnerable and may be transferred to the pension protection fund, which is paid for by taxpayers. It also means that workers will not receive their pensions until they are 65.

Visteon workers have been told that the Visteon UK pension fund is in deficit. It turns out not everyone is affected by this, as senior employees and management transferred their pensions a long time ago.



VISTEON BULLETIN
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Looking forward

When the Ford bosses choose their moment to cut more jobs at Southampton and Bridgend, or when General Motors sell up to Fiat who then decide to slash production at Ellesmere Port's Vauxhall plant, the ability of Unite to fight back will be down by 600 militant members from Visteon. That is the reality of the redundancy deal in wider trade union terms. This is why the lessons of the dispute need to be kept live and carried to every section of workers who decide to fight back.

The Visteon strike could have won a lot more. The occupation not only challenged the bosses' right to dispose of workers and plant as they wish, it also challenged the anti-union laws. It showed, as did Lindsey, that workers can defy those laws in practice and ensure they are rendered useless if we stick together in that defiance. We need to force the unions to recognise this and write defiance of these laws into their strategy for resisting the impact of the recession.

Alongside parents in Lewisham, Glasgow and Greenwich who have occupied their schools when they were threatened with closure or privatisation, the Visteon workers have challenged the assumption that the bosses can do what they like with our factories, offices and schools. They have challenged the notion that the law is higher than working class needs. John Maguire, a Belfast Visteon worker, told us:

"I believe the Visteon dispute could be sorted out now and sorted out a lot earlier if the Thatcher laws of anti-unionism had been attacked. Our union needs to push to break the Thatcher anti-union laws while they're still in existence. When that's done we'll have a proper, fighting trade union back together."

John also spelt out another vital lesson of the dispute – the need for the rank and file to control the unions. Woodley can get away with his strategy because he does not face a strong organised opposition in the union and the odds against organising such an opposition are stacked by the bewildering level of bureaucracy that exists in the unions. The officials rely on rules and practices that distance the union machine from the members. That has to be reversed. As John put it:

"All positions in the trade union have to be up for election every year and all salaries must be within reach . . . if you become a leader of the trade union and you were an electrician, then your salary should be based on an electrician's salary. They need people who want to do this because they genuinely want to do it to help people.

"If they aren't getting anything out of it then we know that we have the right people at the top of the unions. I know there are times they have to go places and meet people but I'm talking about all trade unions, it's gone too far, too close to companies. It needs to get back to grass roots.

"It's a bit like Animal Farm, when you see what's happening. I'm not saying the intentions are necessarily wrong but when I was a convenor here I spent most of my time talking to management. When you're talking to management all the time you have to be very careful, you can end up talking like them. I made a point

of coming in and doing a bit of work. People bring it to where you are."

This is an eloquent statement of the need to rebuild the unions as democratic fighting organisations controlled by their members. It explains why we need organised rank and file movements in all unions. Militants across all industries need to start to organise networks that can ensure action is supported, solidarity is implemented regardless of the law and disputes are settled on the say so of those in struggle.

Every opportunity to build such a movement should be taken, from the organisation of stewards' commit-

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tees in the workplaces through to the co-ordination of a national network. And if at all possible the legacy of the Visteon dispute, and others like it, need to be translated into something permanent, something that keeps alive the tremendous sense of solidarity, creativity, imagination, courage and resourcefulness embodied in the actions of the 600 workers who defied a multinational.

How many times do workers find themselves scratching their heads wondering where they can hold a meeting, where they can go to get labour movement-wide information, where they should go for advice on welfare, where they can create a social life that is imbued with the spirit of solidarity that was on display while they were on strike?

One thing the unions should be doing instead of paying out lavish salaries to bureaucrats and maintaining plush buildings that are rarely seen or used by the members is to set up trade union social centres in all of the country's major towns. These centres can be a resource, a place for spreading information, a place for meeting and a place for fun. They could become rank and file centres for rank and file workers.

Visteon workers could take a lead just as the Liverpool dockers did after their heroic strike in the 1990s did when they established the Casa, a union social centre. By setting up such a place which could provide the means for ensuring that the spirit and lessons of their struggle are passed on to the new struggles that will unfold.

And perhaps what needs to be carried over to such struggles more than anything else is the glimpse of the future that the Belfast occupation gave us, a glimpse of a life lived on the basis of solidarity, of workers' control, of the recognition of the need to challenge the reckless pursuit of profit and replace it with the production of things to meet human need and of workers unleashing their own potential to become the masters of their own destiny. It was a glimpse of socialism – and it looked good.