

Michael Harrison 1971

What's Wrong at Fords

*Published by the Joint Ford Shop
Stewards Committee for the information
of their yellow trade unionists on
the history of disputes at Fords*

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WHAT'S WRONG AT FORDS

WE have produced this pamphlet to give you the facts regarding the vital struggle facing trade unionism in Fords which we feel is not only a struggle against us in Fords but, if we allow the firm to get away with this blatant and shameless victimisation, will have widespread repercussions throughout industry.

We publish this to combat the onesided view which has appeared in much of the Press—partly because of the huge sums Fords spend on advertising.

It is our belief that the fierce competition that will face us from the European Common Market, whether we go in or stay out, is the basic reason for the attack on the trade unions at this time.

Fords mean to capture orders. In order to do so they have to sell at a price well below their competitors. To do this, and to continue to show high profits, they have either to increase the speed of the lines or resist wage demands, or both.

It is obvious that if Fords are allowed to get away with this, other employers will also attack, within their plants, the organisations which are defending wages and conditions.

As a Shop Stewards Committee we have always practised solidarity not only with trade unionists but with other victims of social injustice such as pensioners and tenants and therefore, in asking for your support, we are sure of a hearing.

'Bleeding to Death'

To read the Press you would believe that the Ford Company had been brought to its knees, that it was on the verge of bankruptcy as a result of its employees' actions. "Bleeding to death" was the term used by the chairman, Sir Patrick Hennessy.

The facts are, however, that in 1961 Fords' profits were £32½ million. This was considered to be a bad year for the motor industry and included sales by Fords at special low prices on the Continent in order to secure a foothold in preparation for the Common Market.

The profit worked out at £12 a week from each employee. Ford's have also expanded their plant out of current profit in the period 1955/9 by the sum of £72 million. They are currently spending £30 million on the Halewood (Liverpool) plant and an estimated £20 million on extensions at Dagenham and Basildon.

Fords claim that they want trade unions in their factories. We will let the facts speak for themselves.

In the United States the Ford Motor Company was the last of

the large motor companies to recognise the trade unions. It was not until 1941 that the workers won out.

This they had to do against a service department which employed an army of professional thugs and strong arm men lead by Harry Bennet, who was Henry Ford's right-hand man. Bennet's record of anti-trade union violence can be examined in the novel "Flivver King" by Upton Sinclair.

Ford used "servicemen" to prevent trade union organisation. If anyone was heard by company informers mentioning trade unions he was put out of the gate.

Policy of isolation

There were many attempts to organise the Detroit plant in the '30s, while Ford defeated organisation by a policy of isolation. His factories were built far from the road; one man was not allowed to talk to the next and there was no contact between shops. When a stand was made against bad conditions the newspapers immediately ran a campaign that this was the work of agitators, troublemakers—ignoring the bad conditions which caused the strike.

In the course of the long battle to prevent organisation all measures were used including shooting, tear gas and hoses. But to no avail, for in 1941, after long years of struggle, there was a strike over victimisation and the company agreed to recognition.

There was also a long and bitter campaign to win recognition in Fords of Britain, the last British car manufacturers to agree to trade unionism.

The first strike at Dagenham, in 1933, arose from a wage cut of 6d. an hour. Seven hundred toolroom workers walked out in protest and were joined by the majority of production workers, bringing the total to around 7,000.

"Sir Percy to the barricades" was the headline in the Star evening newspaper, for the struggles on the picket line were sharp—"The confusion was so great owing to the mass picketing with flying squads, mounted police, firemen with hoses, barricades, buses, cars jamming the entrance that company chairman Sir Percival Perry had to close the factory."

This strike resulted in talks with the strike committee which won a reduction in the cuts from 6d. to 3d. but failed to gain trade union recognition.

In 1939 began another long campaign to organise the plant. War-time conditions caused difficulties. Many of the members of the organising committee were drafted into the Forces. Some were transferred to other factories but, despite the difficulties, in 1944 the shop

stewards staged a sitdown in the main plant which resulted in the TUC signing an agreement with Fords—an agreement, however, still without recognition for shop stewards. And immediately afterwards Albert Sweetman, the convener, was sacked for making a phone call to his trade union official.

On March 8, 1946, some 11,000 Ford workers went on strike for more wages and recognition. The company threatened to lock out the factory from March 16, but finally agreed to recognise shop stewards, who became known as "the 75"—the number of stewards agreed to.

This paved the way for many improvements, all of which were won from the floor in the same way as the battle for recognition. They included an annual wage claim and the 10-minute tea break. Overtime and shift rates and the statutory holiday payment were not agreed till 1948.

Fords have been obliged to recognise trade unions but have continuously carried out a policy of trying to make them ineffective. Many stewards have been victimised.

Among them are Bro. J. Kneller who was sacked for coming back to see his "opposite number" steward on the night shift. Bro. J. Chambers was dismissed for sitting down to drink his tea on the tea service. Bro. Borer, who stayed behind to see the dayshift men on a problem they had in common, was also sacked.

The case of the associated plant Briggs, bought out by Fords in 1955, is a further example. For in 1957, using the Suez crisis as an excuse, many thousands were sacked including stewards and committee men. Mr. Barke played a leading role in this for Fords. He now sits on the board of directors.

This did not break trade unionism but the company soon had another try by sacking Johnny McLoughlin. The trade union movement at a national level allowed McLoughlin to be victimised though a ballot vote of AEU members decided in favour of strike action.

What are the facts on stoppages at Fords?

We will examine a period when the company refused discussion on wages because of alleged disruption.

Deliberately created image

There can be no doubt that the company has deliberately created an image of Ford workers as strike crazy. At a time when a group of men worked ten hours overtime in a week instead of the eleven laid down by the company this has been classified as a dispute.

Taking for example a six-week period which the company complain of, the total man hours lost through strikes were 109½ out of approximately 16 million hours worked—or 7.8 seconds a man.



Fords' speed-up policy has caused innumerable disputes. Scenes like this—a mass meeting of Paint, Trim and Assembly men voting for action against speed-up—have been a common occurrence

Including lost overtime the total hours not worked were 5,452. Compare this with the average time lost through certified sickness of 378,000 hours for such a six-week period.

We regret, as any trade unionist must, that there have been unofficial stoppages because they show that there is a gap between the members and the union officials. We also feel that if national officials had taken a stronger attitude on some of the outstanding problems there would be less cause for strikes.

A chronic cause of trouble at Fords is the amount of work the individual is instructed to carry out. Work levels are fixed without consulting the unions. At district and national level the company has always insisted on work study under a system operated by them, and without participation by the unions which is normal practice in the engineering and allied trades throughout Britain.

An estimated timing is laid down before a new model is built and as the time allowed is too short there is constant pressure by the company to get the man to do the job in the estimated time.

A man may be told that he should be doing a job in two minutes

when, in fact, he needs five minutes. Then the company will continually "chase up" to get the job done in two minutes.

On the other hand if an operation has been running smoothly for months or years with no engineering or material changes, the company will try to speed up the men on the job.

On line work—such as body, tractor and trim assembly—pressure is particularly great. Increased use of automation in the early stages of manufacture such as machining and press work has brought more pressure on the remaining manual work stages to keep pace with the growing output from the automated areas.

How they work the trick

The company increases the workload on line work by the following methods :

1. Gradually increasing the line speed with more cars going down per hour without any increase in the labour force;
2. Breaking up an operation previously done by one man into five or six parts and giving each part as additional work to another man on the line, thus eliminating a man;
3. Using the fluctuation of car sales to force men to do more work. For instance if 100 men were producing 100 cars and the number required dropped to 90, then ten men would be taken off. But when the schedule went up to 100 jobs again only seven men would be put back. Thus 97 men would be doing work previously performed by 100. With the schedule of vehicles fluctuating daily this device had led to many clashes.

Increases in the amount of work have been opposed by members even though they do not directly affect the rate of pay, which works out at 7s. 4½d. an hour for a production worker and 8s. 1½d. for the skilled man, plus merit money which differs from shop to shop and individually, but averages about 3d. an hour. This means a gross wage of £15-£16 for the standard week of 40 hours and not the £30 or £40 which most of the press asserts.

Increased work has meant a worsening of conditions and constant pressure on our members taking the form of people being penalised, policed by supervision and moved from job to job.

This speed-up is not unique to Fords in Britain but has been the cause of much strife in the parent company in the United States.

The American car workers' union, the United Automobile Workers led some great sitdown strikes on this issue. This is how UAW President Walter Reuther, who was among those beaten up in the early days of organising Fords, describes them and links them to the present day :

"The struggle of those early days centred largely on the employers'

callous demands for the inhuman continual speed-up which sapped the workers' energy and strength. The courage of the sitdowners won through to victory over an industry that had driven workers to the breaking point of physical endurance.

"Out of the victories of the sitdown strikes came the realisation that the establishment and maintenance of a fair and normal work load performed at a normal work pace and tied to good working conditions are as vital as good wages and the security of union-won fringe benefits."

"The frequency with which the union had to speak out and act against speed-up demands of employers testifies to the recurrent character of the problem. The basic policy established by the International Executive Board on April 28, 1949, was, in effect, a reiteration of the union's historic position and a promise to continue it.

"The UAW is unalterably opposed to and will fight against any attempt by employers to endanger the health and safety of workers by forcing them to perform an unreasonable work load . . ."

"It is our policy to authorise strike action in any plant, large or small, big corporation or small shop, when the facts show that an employer is attempting to drive his workers to make them produce more than a fair day's work.

"Thousands upon thousands of production standard disputes have been settled through the bargaining process pursuant to this policy, on the plant floor, at the bargaining table, by means of the picket line. Thousands more will be settled in the months and years ahead."

"Since the last convention, in General Motors, Ford and Chrysler alone, it was necessary repeatedly to give notice of strike action.

"At Fords it was necessary to implement the union's policy. There 29 strike notices were submitted to the company. Twenty-three of these differences were settled without resort to strike, but the strike weapon had to be used in six instances. At the Assembly plant in St. Louis the strike over production standard problems lasted almost 12 weeks and was not settled until after the new national agreement."

The 'Cologne yardstick'

This unreasonable increase in work load has worsened since Fords USA bought out the British shareholders. It has led to methods of comparing working rates in Ford plants internationally—but not to improve living standards and working conditions. On the contrary, they want the plant with the highest rate of production to serve as a yardstick for all plants, using factories, not individuals as pacemakers.

The Cologne factory is being used for comparison with Dagenham. But speed-up is far worse there—so bad in fact that Germans are reluctant to work in the plant and much of the labour is Spanish.



Perhaps the biggest meeting of trade unionists to take place in B

Italian and Greek. These people from low living-standard areas are brought in to do the job in conditions the German will not tolerate.

This internal competition can only be stopped by establishing effective international contacts between all Ford workers to ensure that they are not used against each other.

The slogan should be : An injury to one worker is an injury to all workers—British, American or German.

This is the background to the trouble at Fords.

'Classic' Trim incident

It is also the background to the victimisation of Bro. Francis, AEU, after 14 years at Fords, ten of them as a shop steward.

Five days before the dismissal of Bro. Francis, the FNJNC agreed to accept a wage claim of 10s. a week, but with it was a provision recognising the company's right to discipline members independent of the trade union side. This undoubtedly encouraged the company in its attitude toward Francis. (See Appendix A.)

The incidents began on the Classic Trim section where our members were assembling the complete doorglass, channels, regulators and quarter-vents at the rate of 35 a shift.

The last time the work load increased from 32 to 35 the members were told that if they did the 35 no further increases would be asked for. Then the company sought to increase the number of doors by four per man per shift.

It was proposed to do this by cutting the gang on the operation from nine men to eight without cutting the line speed. The gang



tain in recent years. A mass meeting of Ford workers in June, 1961

agreed under protest to try this and a man was taken off on Monday, October 15.

As eight men could not do the work previously done by nine they were pulled out of position down the line. This hindered other operations and they were helped get back by additional labour on the job. This continued throughout Tuesday.

On Wednesday morning the company claimed that three of the eight men were "leading resistance" to increased production. They were taken off the line and replaced with three other members.

At this stage the doorglass gang stopped work in protest against the three members being "sorted out." The three men were replaced and the job continued. After a further hour the convener and stewards were sent for and told that the three men were being changed. This resulted in a protest.

The production manager, Mr. Boxall, left the office temporarily and, in his absence, Francis reached agreement with the superintendent about the replacement of the three men. Boxall quashed the agreement immediately on his return.

Again the three men were taken off the job and replaced; this led to a stoppage, though resumption of work was obtained with the three men taken out but left in the vicinity.

After an hour's delay on the company side the management started discussions by stating that the eight men on the job were drifting down the line out of position and if this continued the line would be shut down.

The stewards then asked that the original three men be returned to the line since experience had proved in the past hour that, although

they had been replaced, the gang could not hold the line. This was refused.

The convener then asked that before the company started shutting down the line—which would result in locking members out—procedure should be carried out. He asked for an immediate joint works committee. The personnel manager indicated that this was not likely to be granted.

On this reply the company was asked to take no further action until district officials had been called into discussion. This also was refused.

Francis, in company with three other stewards of other unions, as was the normal practice then reported back during the lunch hour to the members on the trim line who, after receiving the report, decided that if the three men were victimised or if the company locked out any members, the whole area would give full support.

That afternoon the line ran normally and 15 minutes before the end of the shift Bros. Halpin (plant convener) and Francis were sent for by the plant manager, Mr. Cartledge, and told that Francis was dismissed on the spot for holding a lunchtime meeting.

On being asked by the convener to withdraw the notice to allow discussions Mr. Cartledge said it was too late for that. Francis refused to accept his cards and left the office. On hearing the news many areas of the factory downed tools and walked out. The night shift walked out too.

The next day one shift held a mass meeting and 3,000 voted unanimously to remain out until Francis was reinstated. The following day the whole plant met and voted for the same action by 5,317 to six.

Part of the Body plant connected to the Assembly plant had been locked out as a result of the stoppage but other sections stopped in support.

Meantime district officials had been into the plant and had been told that not all the members who were on strike would be re-employed. This was conveyed to the mass meeting the following Tuesday and the meeting voted by 5,801 to 79 to remain out until Francis was reinstated.

The AEU Executive Council met the same day and agreed to refer the problem to the National Ford Joint Negotiating Committee.

'Operation Resumption'

On the Thursday a mass meeting of the strikers passed a resolution asking the union side of the NFJNC to recognise the stand they were making and declare the dispute official.

The union side of NFJNC met on October 25 and decided (see Appendix B) to recommend a resumption of work with the AEU dealing with the problem of Francis.

Bros. O.Hagan and Kealey then telephoned the company on the resumption of work and reported the following :

"I have had a word with Mr. Blakeman, labour relations manager, without revealing any of our discussion and he said that if there was a resumption of work they would take steps to employ all the operatives they possibly could, right away. They would progressively step up production so he would anticipate all operatives would be in within a week."

"I asked about the other statement in which the company said they might not be able to take them all back. Mr. Blakeman said that was a position he could not answer yet. There might be one or two that would no longer be required."

"I asked would this be ordinary redundancy. He said yes. I said, in these cases, were the company prepared to have them subjected to scrutiny and investigation in order to remove any doubts regarding victimisation. Mr. Blakeman said that we could have that undertaking willingly. He also agreed that following a resumption of work we could have an immediate meeting of the NJNC."

Mr. Blakeman was later to deny having given these assurances.

The resolution of the NJNC was put to a mass meeting on the Friday following. It was a stormy meeting at which Bro. Matthews, the General and Municipal Workers' national officer denied any possibility of redundancy. Following a long discussion the meeting voted for a full resumption of work on the following Monday.

Letters are scrutinised

Immediately after this vote the company moved in and sent letters to everyone involved in the dispute telling them not to report for work until instructed.

Those who received a letter to report also had to sign an accompanying statement pledging good behaviour and co-operation in preventing so-called restrictive practices. Failure to sign this letter meant termination of employment.

Then the company servicemen patrolled the gates and only allowed entry to people who had signed. The letter was scrutinised and the member was directed to the department he was to work in. Many members were sent to strange shops where they had no idea what had been the customary speeds, local agreements, etc.

Before starting work the member was interviewed by the foreman and told how much work he would have to do and "to watch his step, for there were thousands outside the gates." In many cases the amount of work expected was a third more than before the dispute.

An example was the cushion shop where the figures insisted on were 37 per cent higher. On any objection being raised the member

was told: "It's no good seeing the steward—that is finished."

The company continued to police the gates and when work finished at the end of a shift the member had to obtain a gate pass to gain admittance on the following day.

This meant that if a member did not do exactly as the company wanted then his gate pass could be withheld and he would join the thousands outside the gate waiting for a letter to start work.

By this method, which has applied for many weeks, the Ford management have got their factory on the basis of work permits.

When work started there was no way of using the procedure that the company hypocritically defend. For only 28 stewards were restarted out of the agreed complement of 62.

Stewards inside the plant were in no better position to operate procedure than those outside, for they were tied down on the job and not permitted to speak to their members. If they made a move at all the supervision immediately stopped them.

By these methods the company achieved a speed-up of such severity that they were able to put conditions back to the '30s—before trade unionism was accepted by Fords. Members were not allowed to speak to each other on the threat of suspension.

Many people left the plant—obviously because of bad conditions. In the week ending November 16, about 209 members left the Paint, Trim and Assembly plant, a figure some 20 times the normal rate for this time of the year when the average is about ten a week.

The national officials met on Wednesday, October 31. At this meeting Bro. O'Hagan stated that the resumption of work was not on the lines of the statement made over the telephone by Mr. Blakeman to himself and Bro. Kealey (TGWU).

The meeting then agreed to meet the company to clarify the telephone conversation and the method of resumption, and to demand a return of all members on a basis of cuts in overtime and any redundancy to be negotiated on the basis of last in first out.

'Signed under duress'

At the meeting with the company Bro. O'Hagan opened on the following lines: That he resented Mr. Blakeman's repudiation of the statement that "there would only be one or two not re-started"; that had there been any idea of discrimination the decision of the trade union side for a resumption would have been different; further that any letters signed by our members had been signed under duress and their issue to employees was to be deplored.

After a lengthy discussion the trade union side left the company with a proposal: that they were not accepting a figure of 500 to 600 redundant and if there were to be redundancy it should be dealt with



A typical line where speed-up occurs
on the last in first out principle.

The meeting then adjourned until Monday, November 5, but at the resumed meeting the company refused to agree to this principle. However, during the discussion, the cuts in purchase tax on cars from 45 per cent. to 25 per cent. were announced. The company then stated that a large number of the 600 would be taken back but not 70 whom they considered were unco-operative. Twelve of these were stewards.

The officials protested at the blacklisting of members. Eventually they asked for the 70 to be included in the 600 on a last in first out basis. This was refused by the company, who insisted on their right to discriminate.

In view of the company's obstinacy the trade union side agreed on the issue of a 7-day strike notice from November 11. Following this meeting the AEU met the company on Francis' case, Fords refusing him reinstatement on the grounds that he had broken a company rule.

The union said that Francis was accompanied by three other stewards and that he had only been reporting back results of discussions. The company were adamant. They would not have him back even in another department without credentials as suggested by the union.

This case has since gone back to the AEU executive who have referred it back to the NFJNC. The AEU executive also called for a meeting of all 22 executives of unions on the NFJNC which took

place at TUC headquarters on November 14, when it was agreed not to accept discrimination but to defer the strike and ask the trade union committee to meet the company again.

The union side of the negotiating committee met immediately afterwards and agreed to this, arranging to meet the company on November 19.

The Fords' code

This meeting took place and the union side asked the company to withdraw its discrimination. The company, instead of agreeing, made a lengthy statement as follows :

1. *"We intend to continue to operate a firm policy under which we shall retain the right to terminate the employment of employees who refuse to play their part and give a fair day's work."*
2. *"We are determined to obtain law and order and normal working conditions with efficient operation in our plants—not merely at the moment but in the future. It is not our intention in future to continue to employ any man who indicates by word or action that he is not prepared to conform to the regulations, the agreements, or the conditions that he accepts when he accepts employment with us."*
3. *"In future any man who goes out on unofficial strike must not assume that he will get his job back automatically. Also we will make it clear to them that those who do participate in unofficial strikes are no longer worthy of the additional payment that we make in the form of merit money and, when they go out on wildcat strikes, they will lose a significant proportion—if not all—of the merit money they may be receiving."*

This statement made it clear that Fords were not going to take the victimised members back. In fact they made clear that in future victimisation would be their method of conducting business. As a result of this the trade unions then withdrew and decided to negotiate the cases individually.

On November 20 the Ford Joint Stewards Committee met and views were expressed that this statement meant a new era of thought control in Fords. Views like these :

You don't need to act but only to speak against any policy of the company to be out of the gate. If this policy were to be applied in any trade-union organised factory in Britain every shop steward doing his job would be fired immediately.

Regarding the statement about termination of employment "if you don't do a fair day's work"—Who is to decide? The trade unions

have no part in this. Is a man doing a fair day's work if he walks from job to job, or will the foreman decide he should be running?

This is a return to hire and fire.

Feeling among the stewards was united.

As a result the committee decided to ask union officials to insist on the withdrawal of this statement. The committee was also critical but felt that if the company insisted on victimisation then the unions should implement the strike decision. (Appendix C.)

This decision clearly affirmed the view that if Fords are to be stopped from their anti-trade union attitude and if the unions are to function for their purpose of protecting working conditions and living standards then the company's victimisation policy must be defeated now.

Individual unions have since taken up their members' cases when the company have attempted to barter one man against another and have been rebuked. They have also insisted that the one or two they might consider having back must sign a letter indicating that next time they break any rule they will be liable to instant dismissal, and that they will not hold any trade union office which would enable them to represent members during their service at Fords.

The list of victimised members now numbers 38. These include five stewards and one branch secretary of the Vehicle Builders; three Transport and General stewards; four AEU stewards, including Francis and the PTA convener; a member of the works committee, and the chairman and deputy convener of the body plant.

In addition to this there are members who have been stewards in the TGWU and the General and Municipal Workers.

No specific complaints have been made by the company against these members. All they are guilty of is insisting that trade unions should flourish in Fords. They are typical of those members who originally built trade unionism at Fords in the days when Sir Patrick Hennessy claims that life was happy at Dagenham.

Life was happy for Sir Patrick and the company members who could hire and fire on the spot without anyone objecting. Their only limitation was the fact that many local people who had worked in Fords could never be induced to go back. As a result Fords had to go further and further afield for labour.

We hope that after reading this case you will lend support to defeat Fords campaign against trade unionism, for its importance cannot be stressed too much. Indeed, no sooner had Fords got over the immediate threat of a strike called by the national officials than they launched an attack on the Liverpool building workers.

The trade union movement in Britain is being tested by Fords to see if it is strong enough to defeat this attack. It can only do so if the trade unionists of Britain fight alongside us to achieve total

reinstatement and withdrawal of the company's anti-union working conditions.

Press your union executive for action now.

Appendix A

Text of a decision of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee taken October 12, 1962:

"The Trade Unions recognise the right of the Company to exercise such measures as are expressed within the Agreements against employees who fail to comply with the conditions of their employment by taking unconstitutional action. They have stated, however, and the Company has acknowledged, that the Trade Unions shall not be required to share the responsibility of Management in taking action against employees who breach Agreements. The Trade Unions, however, reserve the right to examine such cases."

Appendix B

Text of a resolution adopted by the trade union side of the Ford National Joint Negotiating Committee on October 25, 1962:

"That we ask the AEU to deal with the problem of their shop steward (Brother Francis) and if at any stage they require our assistance (TU side FNJNC) to let us know, meanwhile, we recommend a full return to work in order that the negotiating procedure can be carried out."

Appendix C

Text of a resolution passed by a joint meeting on November 20, 1962, of the shop stewards committees of all the Dagenham plants:

- 1 "The joint meeting of stewards agrees that it was wrong to refer the matter of the victimised members to their separate Unions. We feel that the NJNC should have insisted on the principle of all back with no victimisation.
- 2 "Bearing in mind the decisions of yesterday, each Union must insist on all back immediately. Failing agreement on any individual, then the Union should refer the case to the NJNC on the basis of previous declarations to take action if all members are not taken back."
- 3 "Insist that National Officials refute the statement made by the Company on the future working of members in the plants.
- 4 "That we insist that stewards should be allowed to function in the plant and operate all the customary agreements and we ask the National Officials to ensure that this happens."