

SOLIDARITY MOTOR BULLETIN

10p

5



SPAIN: struggle
at SEAT Barcelona

SPAIN: the struggle at SEAT Barcelona

OCTOBER 1974

JANUARY 1975

Before the death of Franco there had already been plenty of signs of unrest in Spain. The months of October '74 to March '75 saw the biggest wave of strikes, up to that time, since the Civil War, with the SEAT car factory in Barcelona a centre of disturbance. As well as being a focal point of workers' struggle in Spain, SEAT has a great deal in common with the motor industry in other countries, as the account of what happened there shows.

BACKGROUND

Car firms had been established in Spain from 1960, part of the rapid transformation and concentration of production dating from the early '50s, backed by American investment and later contacts with the E.E.C. By 1970 the number of motors produced annually was 2,378,000. SEAT, manufacturing FIAT cars under licence, dominated the Spanish market in 1969 with 57% of sales; in the same year it produced its first Spanish model, the SEAT 1430, designed for mountainous and tropical conditions (Sunday Times, 18-5-69).

The Spanish state was a prime mover in the process of industrial expansion, supervising and regulating the labour market and controlling the reserve of labour for foreign production. Unemployment could be kept at the "acceptable" level of under 2% because much of it was exported, with 2½ million Spaniards migrant workers. So the state, in spite of the image of feudal backwardness associated with the Franco regime, functioned as a planner of modern production, pursuing its economic aims with intervention in various sectors and a regional population policy.

Semi-skilled migrant labour was extensively used in the new production inside Spain. Moroccans, Portuguese and 2 million Spaniards from the south moved to the industrial areas of the Basque country and Barcelona. Their motivation was obvious: to earn money; but they did so without becoming adjusted to the rhythm of production or the discipline of the assembly-line. Uprooted from regions where there was a certain tradition of self-reliance among the day-labourers and resistance in the old industry, they showed in their first big revolt in 1969 that they had come for the money not for the sake of working. Every attempt to lengthen hours and intensify work was resisted, and the "normal" work week of 50 hours was reduced through the workers' self-defence.

This resistance happened through necessity not ideology; in fact the migrant workers showed themselves ignorant of and hostile to the tradition of "political education". They refused to let their struggle be taken over as a project for the modernisation of the Spanish state, as prescribed by the Communist Party. They were not struggling against the "fascist" nature of the state, but against the state in its relation to workers. The exigencies of mass production, and the ways of escaping from it, were substantially the same for them as for any other European worker. The Spanish state, even if the authoritarian set-up allowed it to throw its weight around more than most, reacted vis a vis the workers in fundamentally the same way as other states with similar industrial development.

Spanish workers are thus engaged in a direct confrontation with production and the state which actually runs counter to any idea of co-opting them into a democratic struggle for another state form. Parties working for "democratic" solutions have limited influence. The C.P. is based on the relatively small numbers of workers who remain stable in a given factory and locality, while the preponderant part of the working class is made up by the mobile unskilled.

Workers do not have much time for the pedlars of "participation", having no wish for a voice in the management of production, i.e. in their own exploitation. In the motor industry and in other sections their struggle is the outcome of their position as a class, not of any spurious need for a say in the boardroom. Participation is a main plank in the platform of the Comisiones Obreras (Workers' Commissions - illegal), which function as the Trades Union section of the C.P. Their structure and pre-fabricated "demands" appear alien to the new workers. In some cases the C.O.s do attempt to exceed the bounds of "respectable" struggle but usually they are left behind, unable to get to grips with the changing situation as struggles develop.

Spain is generally depicted as a backward country, and the struggle within it tends to be justified by various ideologies in terms of Spain's peculiarities - the traditional left line about supporting the Spanish workers in their resistance against fascism. This misses the point of the basic similarity between the struggles of workers in different countries. We don't mean by this that "It's the same struggle" because all capitalist governments are more or less fascist, but that the social relations of capitalist production - what working in modern industry does to people - are the same everywhere.

BUILD-UP

From 1969 the strike movement got bigger every year. Strikes were usually accompanied by demonstrations through the towns, forcibly dispersed by police. Employers reacted with sackings and lock-outs. Links were made between old and new industry in struggle, especially within the same region. SEAT workers were well to the fore, as these examples show:

1970 - stoppages

Summer '71 - resistance to continual intensification of work

Oct-Dec. '71 - strike, occupation of SEAT factory by the 30,000 workers, daily marches through Barcelona past other factories; police repression including shots fired inside the factory; lock-out followed by renewed strike; SEAT worker shot dead in clash with police; work stopped all round Barcelona.

Early '73 - strikes including SEAT

OUTBREAK: OCTOBER '74

After a period of unrest, especially in the Basque country, the new strike wave began in Valladolid when the workers of Fasca-Renault, the second car factory in Spain, began a long strike against new work methods. Work was stopped at other factories in the town, and at Renault the 12,000 workers beat off police attacks. When they went back after being locked out they went on strike again.

In Barcelona there were strikes at twelve large factories, including SEAT and Olivetti, and in the following weeks SEAT became the centre of a country-wide strike movement. The car factories of Pamplona (Leyland, Citroen, Iberica), of Vigo (Citroen), Valladolid (Renault), Barcelona (SEAT, Enasa), Sevilla (Renault), the electro-technical industry, and heavy industry in many places ceased production. The conflict was particularly fierce. In some cases strikes lasted for weeks at a time, and clashes with the police were an almost daily occurrence. The bosses' favourite weapons of sack and lock-out were notably ineffective; when workers were sacked others struck work again, and when they went back after a lock-out they renewed their strike - this happened at Olivetti, Citroen, Firestone, and in the mines - or sabotaged production in other ways.

Police repression was met with firmness. In Biscay the 16,000 locked-out furnacemen tried to take over their plant which was under police occupation. Around SEAT, where police were sent to control the workers, frequent clashes took place. During demonstrations there were often attempts to win parts of the town, especially workers' quarters, from the police. At one point the town of Pamplona seemed to be in the hands of the workers; barricades were set up in working class areas and the offices of the regional newspaper were attacked. Police often opened fire on demonstrators, which resulted in one person being killed and several wounded.

SEAT STRIKE CONTINUED

After an Agreement on production targets ratified in late December and denounced by the work force, the strike situation at SEAT was officially considered resolved. The Barcelona factory was closed for an unusually long Christmas break because it was to be expected, in the general atmosphere of discontent, that the return to work would bring fresh trouble. As soon as the workers could meet, on January 2nd 1975, the agreement was rejected and the demand put forward for complete re-negotiation of outstanding problems, which included the company's production programme, and the collective resignation of the Jurados (workers' "representatives"). Meetings elected representatives directly for this purpose.

Management again resorted to sanctions, this time limited to a day and a half suspension for 7000 workers, and the work force reacted by walk-outs of several groups in succession to hold an informal demonstration in the street while others gathered at the factory gates to protest. Next day a demonstration was called and despite the presence of armed police appeals for support were made in the streets nearby with the slogan "SEAT* will win!" Later there were several clashes in the housing areas, sometimes involving workers from other firms on strike, and also some students who were the target of aggression from the forces of law and order.

Partial stoppages and meetings continued inside SEAT. Criticism of the vertical bureaucrats (quasi Trades-Union hierarchy) was general; a letter sent to the Provincial Representative stated: "The permanence of the officials who "represent" us is one of the most significant causes preventing possible understand-

* Using the company's name as a rallying-cry is quite usual in Spain, perhaps in anticipation of the day the workers take over properly.

ing between workers and company"* A large number of Jurados resigned en bloc, voluntarily or because of pressure from below. More severe sanctions were invoked; on day 7 management sent out a letter warning its victims of more serious punishment, i.e. two months' suspension with loss of pay.

With tension increasing hourly, some elements did not hesitate to criticise the intervention of certain organisers who, to cool things down, suggested visits and petitions to Presidents of professional Colleges, the Captain General, Cardinal Jubany and all. Precious time was wasted like this, while the atmosphere of protest was general throughout the industrial belt. The company's side did not waste time. On day 9 they sent out a legal notice of suspension from work and pay to 21,000 workers, instructing them to report for work on day 15.

The "firemen" organisers were swept aside as demonstrations were improvised all over the place. There were dozens of meetings in the centre of Barcelona, not organised in compact formation but in groups of varying size, perhaps fifty young people or several hundred, keeping the forces of repression on the move. Arrests followed, including five SEAT workers.

When work was resumed nothing had been solved. The Syndical Organisation reinforced the company's position by cynically announcing its rejection of the Jurados' resignation and condemning the workers' "positions of intransigence". The Governor (of Catalonia, presumably) intervened in his turn, instructing the firm to ban workshop meetings or be held legally responsible. Sackings were stepped up to several hundred and despite the combativity of a good section of the work force discouragement started to spread. In some shops there were altercations with foremen and supervisors, one of whom was injured by a booby-trap in his car a few days later. The convenors, those opportunists who only aspire to the heights of the vertical apparatus, repeated remarks like "We must show that we can control them".

AFTERMATH

It may seem odd that the whole strike wave, in which a million workers must have been actively involved, should have dwindled to "normal proportions" on the day of the "General Strike", February 20. But the strikers were not amenable to control from any quarter. These were not "political" strikes -

* This complaint should no doubt be taken to imply that the officials blocked the expression of workers' grievances rather than that they stirred things between workers and management - the latter would be too much to expect.

to force capital into a social framework in which the workers can express themselves - but "social" strikes, in which the class expresses itself as a class. Their political implications for the ruling class were all the more dangerous.

As a result of the strike movement the level of wages in Spain rose, increasing by 28% during 1974, while production decreased or was frozen. Prices meanwhile rose by 20%, but those of basic essentials rose much more rapidly, so that the incomes of workers' families fell in real terms. The situation was aggravated by sackings, less overtime, and short-time working which was brought in extensively from 1975. At SEAT one day less was worked per week and that day's pay lost. Several component firms closed, and this, together with the return of significant numbers of migrant workers from abroad, gave rise to considerable unemployment.

The Spanish state showed itself to be rather at a loss when confronted by the combination of economic recession and workers' militancy. From the ranks of the ruling class an increasing number of voices were raised in favour of "liberalisation" and "democratisation" - an institutional framework to provide an outlet for working class views. At the same time such "enlightened" spokesmen realise the problems that would accompany any modernisation, knowing that the workers themselves cannot be mobilised in its support. The example of Portugal showed that the workers could make their own use of every loop-hole. so there are more voices in favour of gradual rather than sudden change.

State policy developed with the aim of subduing the strike movement but putting over the idea that experiments with democracy had collapsed. One of its methods was to try to hold unemployment figures under two per cent. There is a ban on sackings in Spain, but not all industrialists adhere to it. In fact individual employers were often unhappy with the policy implemented by the state and by the judges who had to pronounce on "labour conflicts". The director of a Bilbao shipyard complained: "The only instructions we get from the authorities, who are afraid of an even more widespread outbreak of strikes that will overthrow them, is to give in to the demands." He went on to explain that the bosses are given hardly any scope for reprisals against militant workers.

No doubt this employer and others would prefer that reprisals were not necessary and that talks could be held quietly at the negotiating table with a respectable delegation of workers who have a responsible attitude towards production. Their problem is that there exists outside the negotiating rooms a working class which is not busy presenting an agenda to a meeting, not waiting for a pet resolution to be passed, and not bound by any sense of responsibility to its exploiters.

A SEAT WORKER'S VIEW

(Excerpts from an interview with one of the participants in the struggle, published by a Dutch newspaper in translation from Lotta Continua, 31 Jan. & 2 Feb. '75)

It all started in July when the struggle in Bajo Llobregat, an industrial area of Barcelona, was at its height. In this bitter struggle, which had been going on since May over the metal-workers' contracts, there was a widespread strike involving umpteen factories. Every day thousands of workers took over the streets of the quarter and the town. Many of us realised the importance of getting SEAT to resist the repression and the high cost of living as soon as possible.

The situation in the factory was not easy. We started getting together and talking it over, two or three of us at a time, in the cloakrooms, at the lunch-hour and so on. Gradually more and more joined us until the groupings expanded into mini factory meetings. Everyone made proposals or put forward demands, or else proposals came out of discussions in the gang. So a set of demands emerged, worked out directly by the workers in the sections. At this point the Workers' Commission (C.O.) tried to get in on the act after shilly-shallying, aware that the struggle would go ahead without it anyway.

Our demands consisted of 18 points, including: 6,000 pesetas (=£46 approx.) per month across the board; guarantees on jobs and wages; the right to debate work speed, to hold meetings, and to elect representatives from the meetings who would be subject to recall by the workers. More than 12,000 signatures were collected in support of the package of demands. There were pockets of resistance and hesitation, but in October the strike began, starting in section 7, the Body Shop. From there we succeeded in generalising the strike to all sections by holding continual marches throughout the factory.

The summary dismissal of one worker showed us what to expect. If we allowed this to happen right at the start it would obviously get worse as we went on, so we went to the office of the head of section 7 to sort things out. In the next few days great unity was established inside the factory, and then the demonstrations outside began. There were clashes with police almost every time, especially as we always chose to assemble at the Syndical Organisation offices or in Catalonia Square, which are both central (such public gatherings being illegal in Spain), and when they

tried to stop us we paralysed all the traffic. We were not intimidated when they kept resorting to firearms, because we remember Villalba, our comrade who died in 1971. On the anniversary of his death we cover the factory with posters bearing his photograph and defend them against any attempts to remove them.

On demonstrations we took the SEAT banner everywhere, and people came and joined us, sometimes doubling the size of the march before we finished. We tried repeatedly to spread the struggle by going to other factories to hold meetings with them, but the police always attacked before it got that far. This happened at Hispano-Olivetti, at Ternica and at the football stadium, where we planned to hold a mass public meeting. Some spies from the political police turned up there - one of them was recognised by a worker he had arrested - and we took advantage of the chaos and confusion to squash them together, so effectively that we bought a newspaper next day to see if there was any report of a policeman having been killed or seriously injured.

Apart from the arrests, an important factor in the decision to go back was the management threat to impose heavy fines, which we were naturally not keen on paying. Of course the confrontation inside has got a lot tougher since we came back after the holidays. After the first strike against speed-up workers had been locked out, and we had to run the gauntlet of police every day. We held daily workers' meetings at the gates or in some square, and then took to the streets. The police reacted violently. In the middle of Barcelona they attacked in jeeps, crushing everyone together like wild beasts, including women and children who had nothing to do with it. At the factory they used horses which they no longer employ in the town, instead of jeeps. We sent people to the street demos., but also to the various authorities to make our position known, and to newspaper offices to make sure they would publish what SEAT workers were thinking and saying. A delegate even went to the Bishop to try to get a statement from him; he wrote to the management, but of course with no result...

Meanwhile management had sacked almost 500 workers, who included those arrested as well as known "trouble-makers", people on sick leave and even one man who died a month ago. I have no doubt that the names of those sacked will be given to the police.

After the lock-out Every worker has to let the police and security guards see his papers, and is threatened with all sorts of things. In the sections there are groups of police with guns to control the workers. It is now hardly possible to find the energy and opportunity to move through the factory to any extent. We have tried all right, but any time a worker does not stand perfectly still or moves any distance, the cops come along and bring him back to where he is supposed to be working. Here and there someone would try sitting down on the

ground, and every time police came and brought him back to his work place. But we could not go much farther because the cops were getting jumpy and the tension steadily increased. We were barred from the coffee-machine, and police went with us to the toilets.

Workers' Commission (CO) The CO at SEAT has been in existence for 5 years. For the PSUC (CP in Catalonia) the CO is the most important organisation, but the workers tend not to identify with them, especially when there are demands being worked out in the factory itself. When we were still working things out, an issue of "Asamblea Obrera" (the clandestine organ of the CO in SEAT) appeared out of the blue with the list of demands all cut and dried, only inviting minor changes.

Those of us in section 7, where the assembly lines came out, were holding meetings to try to clarify what and how much we wanted, and when we should start the action. We asked the CO to refrain from publishing the list of demands through all the sections, but it became obvious that it was going ahead, while doing nothing to prepare the workers.

There are two different ways of looking at the COs. Some people see it as an open forum where everything, including subjects outside the factory, can be talked over and points of view adopted, and where leaders are elected. But there is another way which more people are adopting recently, especially in the Body Shop, that is not to make the CO an opinion-forming body but a stable, omnipresent and clandestine (not semi-clandestine) organisation which will put forward the workers' demands and the viewpoints developed in the different sections.

Political organisations The CP has only a few militants in the true sense of the word inside the factory, but influences a large number of workers who put a lot of trust in the party. It often happens when someone like me talks to the comrades that they are all in agreement over the aims and timing of the struggle and oppose what the CP is putting forward, but they will not admit that their view is not the party line. To me it follows that the CP is not organised in such a way as to be able to give comprehensive preparation to its adherents. In fact many good comrades more or less assume that it is up to them to struggle in the factory and that the party is taking care of the general struggle against the government.

I would like to emphasise that many of these comrades in the factory were always well to the fore in organising stoppages of work, speaking in mass meetings of workers, and being in the front line of marches through the Barcelona streets and clashes with the police.

The PSUC (Socialist Party of Catalonia, actually CP) is not equally strong everywhere in the factory. Its strength is greatest among fitters and mechanics, where it has been present longest. These are a type of specialised, trained worker who have moved up the job ladder; their work is less boring and better paid. In the Body Shop the influence of the PSUC is practically non-existent, because of the kind of worker we get there - many younger men who come from the south of Spain and have had no political preparation, and have to work on the production line at high speed for very low wages. This is also the reason those in the Body Shop are much quicker to start trouble. On the production lines it is much easier to interrupt production and talk to each other, and to refer decisions to the Section as a whole.

Jurados

(Members of a sort of Internal Committee of the syndicate)

Perhaps the division over the Jurados is the biggest there is among the workers - not only is it a question of being for or against them, but of what tactics we should use to deal with them at different stages of struggle, and afterwards.

When we had elected them ("elected" in a manner of speaking, in view of the electoral system which excludes all workers who have ever incurred disciplinary measures and all who have been there less than three years, so that only 50% can vote), we thought that their protection would be significant and nice for us, but SEAT has always been prepared to sack Jurados and they haven't even been able to stop that yet. At the start of the trouble all those Jurados who hadn't shown a firm attitude against the workers were dismissed. Those who were left were either bosses' men already, or, worse in my view, were stupid enough to give in to the boss pretty soon. We demanded their recall, and managed to make them look so ridiculous that they resigned.

They came to work all right, but generally did nothing and stayed sitting in their little office like bosses, and had free transport and other perks. While we would tire ourselves out to get a meeting together, shouting like mad or beating on tin boxes and running two kilometres from one section to another, they would come strolling along with a megaphone. So we would seize it from them and make them clear off.

MULTINATIONAL: MORE INFORMATION

In a two-day seminar at Turin in March 1975 some Spanish and Italian workers met to discuss "economic crisis and workers' struggles" in SEAT and FIAT. The proceedings, published as the first of a series of documentations by the Piedmontese Gramsci Institute, run to over 180 pages, much of it rather academic and long-winded. However, it is obviously not a bad idea to spread

information about multi-national concerns from one country to another. The difficulty is that few workers on the line are likely to get the chance to meet their counterparts abroad, so that conferences tend to be dominated by organisations with some resources behind them and/or "experts" from outside. In this case Communist Party elements are well represented and the Line comes across in the emphasis on "proper representation" for Spanish workers - i.e. what they really need is a strong Trade Union. No doubt car workers in such zones of enlightened democracy as Britain, Germany and the U.S. could disillusion them about this.

All the same the Italian symposium does provide useful information, backed up by statistics, on the multi-national's method of controlling its subsidiary, and on the management's way of turning economic difficulties to its advantage at the workers' expense. Thus exports from SEAT were interrupted when the Italian firm began to experience problems, while those of other Spanish motor manufacturers increased.

Representatives of the SEAT Workers' Commission criticised the "shock-crisis" Report presented by SEAT management, pointing out that it had been followed by overtime and Sunday working (which was rejected by most workers) and plans for increased work-load and production rhythms. Part of the work force was transferred from one section to another to effect a net increase in production with the same workers producing more machines. So the pretext of crisis was used to increase production and reduce costs at the same time. Tables of sales, profits and wages show that the firm was doing quite well out of its workers: wages as a percentage of sales were 17.6% in 1972, 16.6% in 1973; sales increased by 79.4% from 1970 to '73.

Of course it is not denied that the motor industry is experiencing difficulties; we have seen that SEAT did introduce short-time working in January '75. But it is clear that the bosses' account of the "crisis" cannot be taken on trust, and in any case it is not up to the workers to carry the can. Fortunately it does not look as if the car workers in Barcelona have any greater taste for self-sacrifice, in time of sickness as in health of their capitalist rulers, than those of Cowly or anywhere else.

SOURCES

Much of the material in the Bulletin has been taken from an article in a Dutch paper, "Spanje: Inleiding" (Spain: Introduction) and the section "SEAT Strike Continued" from Frente Libertario, Paris, February '75.

TO OUR READERS

After a long delay (for which we apologise) we have finally produced Solidarity Motor Bulletin No.5. This deals with struggles in the Spanish motor industry. One of the often forgotten facts about Spain has been the rapid industrialisation in general and the growth of the motor industry in particular. Between 1964 and 1973 production of cars grew from 123,800 to 713,700. This tendency has increased, as the multi-nationals take advantage of low wage rates and police state methods of maintaining labour discipline.

As we here show, all this did not take place without conflict. The very development of the Spanish economy (and the consequent growth and development of the Spanish working class) will be the greatest source of problems for the Spanish ruling classes in the struggles to come. The much emphasised 'special situation' in Spain is disappearing. There will be no return to the conditions of the '30s and of the Civil War. The imminent next round of class struggle will be based on the problems of developed capitalism, as it exists in the last decades of the 20th century. We hope this Bulletin helps provide car workers elsewhere with some of the background to the struggles of their brothers in Spain.

We have a number of other proposed Bulletins in hand. But we could do with more feedback. We need many more contacts in the industry prepared to help us. We want more letters and more information - in any language. We want leaflets, pamphlets, cartoons. We particularly need information on the motor industry in Sweden, Eastern Europe and the USSR. As always we need cash to continue this work (all contributions welcome). We want to develop this series of Bulletins into something which really helps the exchange of information between car workers, and the development of the struggle against this rotten system.

OTHER MOTOR BULLETINS

- No.1 : Ford struggles 1973 (Amsterdam, Antwerp, Bordeaux, Cologne, Genk, Melbourne). 10p
- No.2 : UAW : Scab Union. Some struggles at Chrysler's
- No.3 : Datsun : Hell's Battlefield
- No.4 : Wildcat at Dodge Truck (Detroit, June 1974)

The Lordstown Struggle : What happened at this General Motors plant in 1972. The new tendencies in production and the developing critique against work itself. 20p