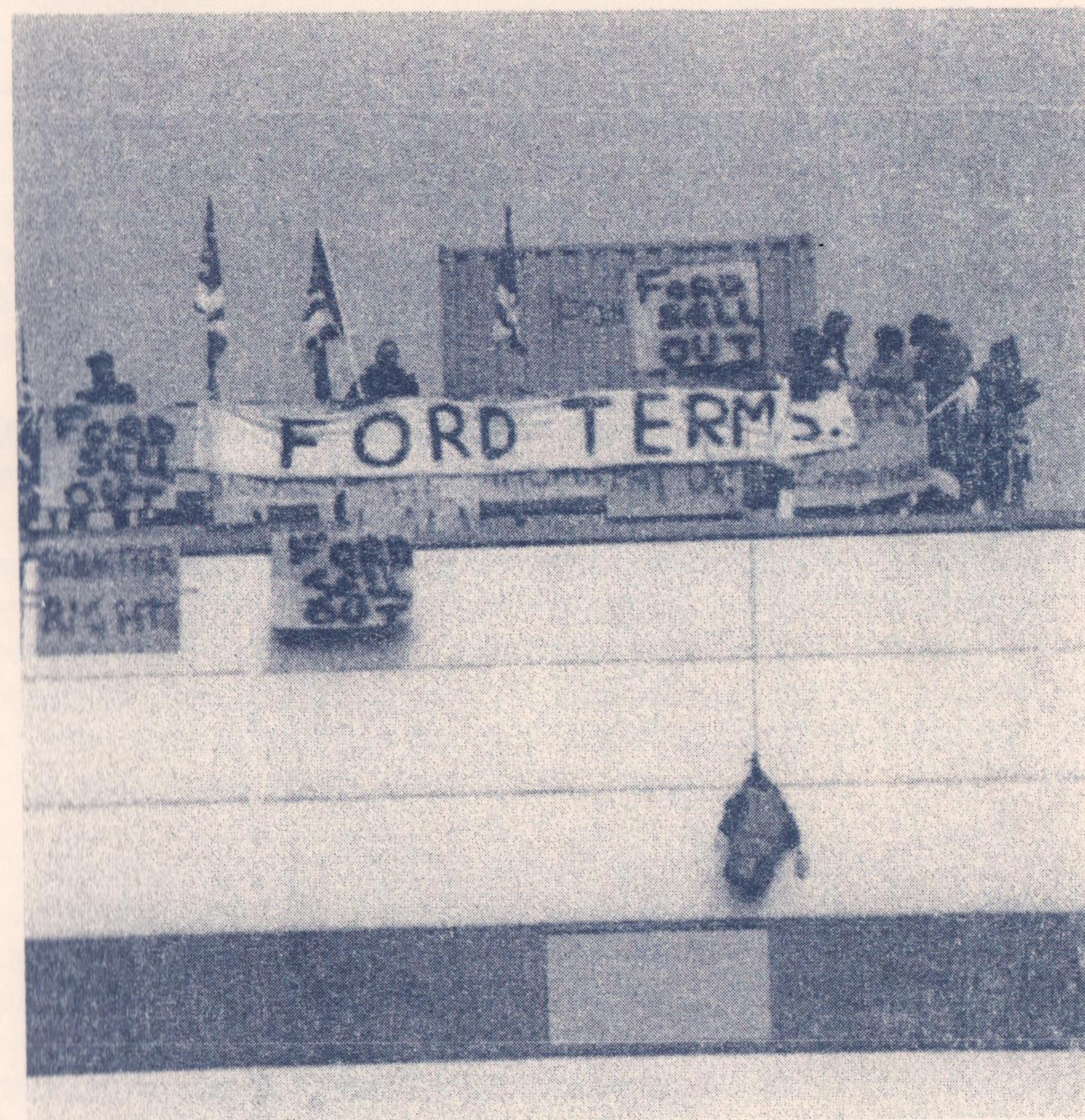
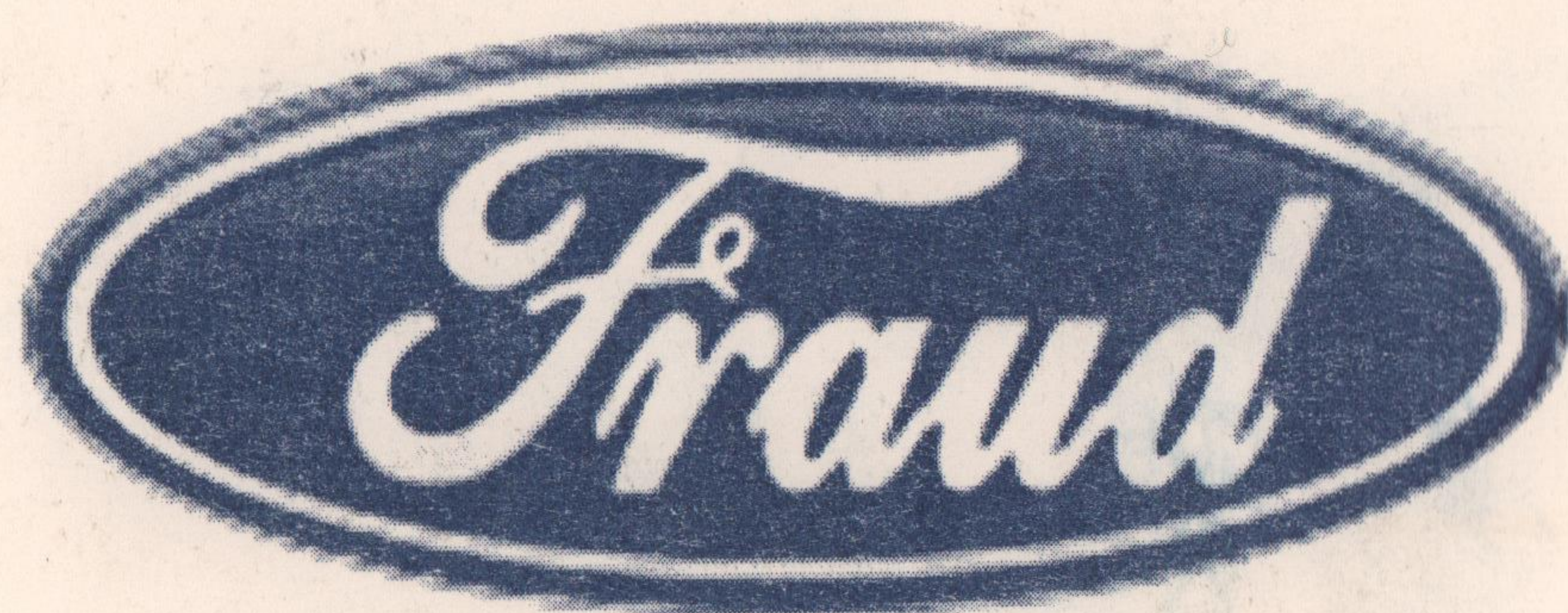


Report & reflections on the 2009 UK Ford-Visteon dispute



a post-Fordist
struggle

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In June 2000 Ford Motor Company outsourced the production of certain component parts to a new company called Visteon - in reality a spin off company of Ford and in which Ford retained a 60% holding. Visteon runs factories all over the globe: in America, Europe and Asia, for example. In England a deal between the Ford company and the union promised all former Ford workers - now employees of Visteon - that they would keep the same wage and pension conditions they'd had with Ford (ie, mirrored conditions). But all newly hired Visteon workers were employed under inferior contracts.

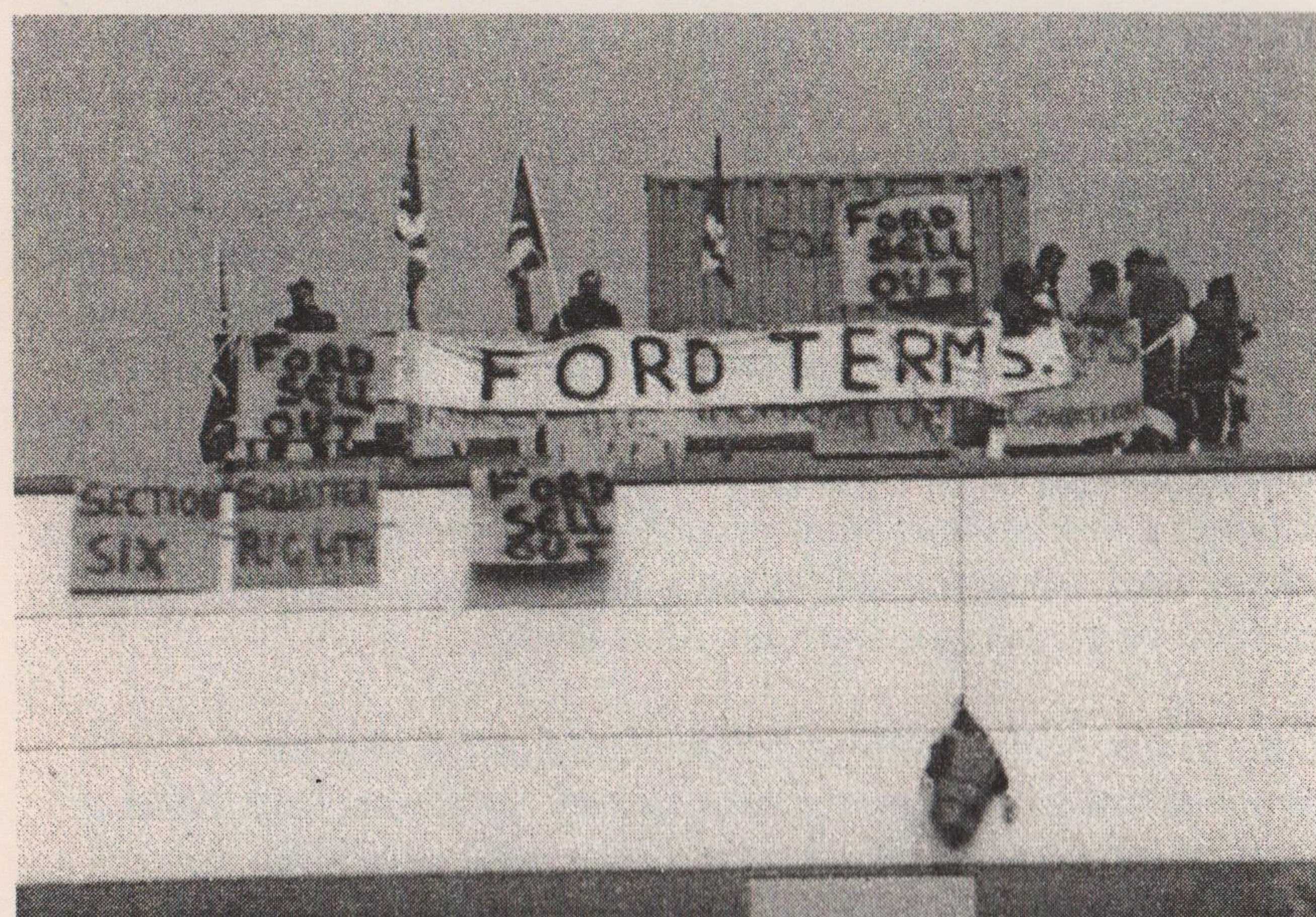
On 31st of March 2009 Ford/Visteon announced the closure of three factories in the UK and the sacking of 610 workers(1). The company was declared insolvent and put into receivership. The receivers visited all three plants; with no prior warning workers were sacked with only a few minutes notice and told only that the company had gone bust. No guarantees were given concerning redundancy or pensions payments. The management had made the workers work up to the last minute, knowing that they would not even receive any wages for their final shifts.

On the 31st workers in Belfast responded to the closure announcement by occupying their factory spontaneously. After a clash with security guards, workers secured the building and within two hours several hundred local supporters had visited the occupation. Two KPMG administrators were on the premises at the time of the occupation and refused to leave. So the workers locked them in a portakabin - where they apparently stayed for 36 hours with no food, before finally agreeing to leave! Such pointless dedication to their job... Some managers' cars also remained locked in the occupation.

Having heard the news about Belfast, the Basildon (Essex), and Enfield (north London) Visteon plants also occupied the next day. The Basildon plant contained no stock or machinery of much value

to the company; so the workers trashed the site offices. A group of riot cops appeared and the workers were 'persuaded' to end their occupation, presumably under the threat of 'leave or you'll be nicked for criminal damage'. They then began 24hr picketing of the plant.

At Enfield the workers were called to a meeting and within six minutes had been made redundant. They were told they could return the next day to collect belongings from lockers. But the next day (April Fools Day) the security guards refused them entry; no doubt on instructions of the company now alerted to the Belfast occupation. After 40 minutes waiting - and inspired by Belfast - they decided to also occupy. Knowing where there was an unlocked gate, they returned to the factory and managed to secure



part of it for themselves; about 100 workers occupied the paint-shop and the roof.

The character of the dispute at the three plants was determined by local conditions; at Belfast many workers lived close to the plant and had strong links with the immediate local community, having shown solidarity to many local causes over the years. So they were provided with plenty of practical support; within hours local people and shops were providing food and other resources for the

occupiers. Unlike the other plants, Belfast was also demanding that the plant be reopened and their jobs saved (though maybe few saw this as a very likely outcome).

West Belfast MP Gerry Adams and Sinn Fein backed the Belfast occupation from the beginning. As one Belfast supporter explained;

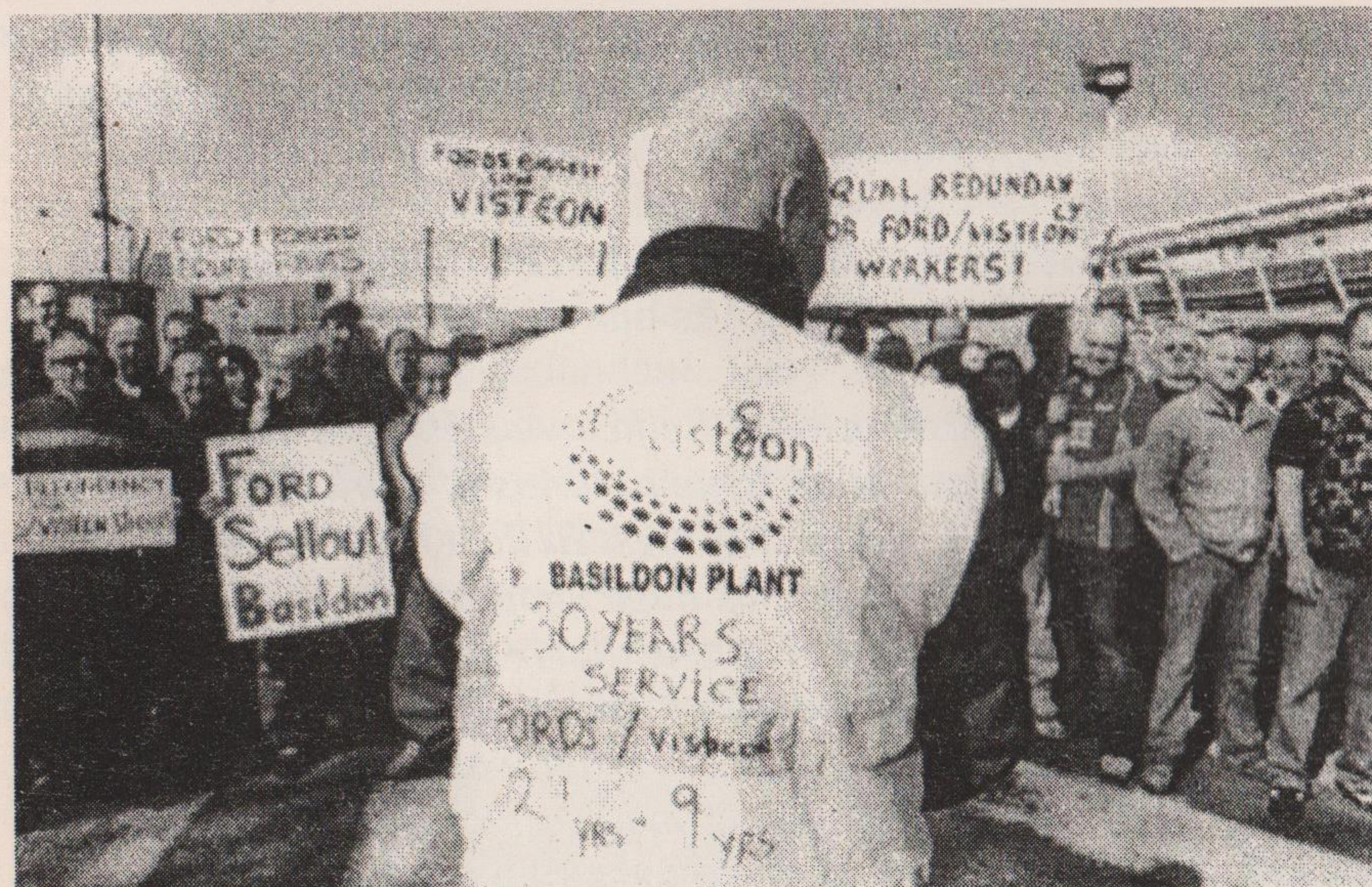
"The workforce in Visteon/Ford Belfast was 50-50 Catholic and Protestant so this was not an issue in terms of workplace make-up. However, the plant is in a part of west Belfast that is almost 100% Catholic and while the plant has huge support from both sides of the community, west Belfast is particularly politicised and republican - so Gerry Adams, necessarily being a populist, jumped behind the campaign. If the plant was in east Belfast, which is mostly Protestant, I very much doubt he'd give a fuck."

Despite Sinn Fein's behaviour - typical of a party committed to managing the capitalist economy - of courting bosses to encourage capital investment in the region, Adams could hardly ignore such an issue at the heart of his voter constituency.

At Basildon and Enfield workers travelled from a wide area in and close to London to work there. At Enfield many of the generally middle-aged workers - a lot of them women - had worked for Ford/Visteon for 20-30 years, and had seen the factory shrink from 2,000 to 227 workers, after spark plug and electronic production was relocated to other factories - some of them as far away as Turkey or South Africa. The workers had a diverse composition; about half of them born in India, Sri Lanka, Italy, the Caribbean and so on.

[Note; the rest of this account concentrates mainly on the Enfield plant, as this is where we were involved as supporters.]

Workers at all plants were members of the Unite union. From the start at Enfield, Unite's only contact point and involvement was via the factory's convenors(2). Some union bosses came down briefly to pledge support, but actually delivered nothing, apart from poor legal advice. The occupiers were left to sustain themselves - despite workers paying years of union subs, no money was given (after 3 weeks or so, it is rumoured that the



union finally provided a little finance). The union gave no mention on its website of the dispute, nor encouraged their members to give active support. So all the resources needed to sustain the occupation and picketing were provided by workers and supporters.

At Enfield, local support was very weak - though close to a working class residential area, the plant was separated across a main road on an industrial estate and the workforce, as commuters, did not have the same immediate local links as Belfast. So despite thousands of leaflets being distributed to locals, it brought very little response or involvement. This is a sign of the times and a symptom of 25 years of defeats in class struggles; people are now far less likely to recognise themselves and their own common interests in the struggles of others - solidarity has become an alien concept for many in an increasingly atomised reality. The working class has become largely a fragmented, individualised class in itself rather than a class acting for itself with any great unity. Part of the optimism over recent UK workers' struggles is that they may be the early signs of overcoming this long and weary fragmentation that has so changed the atmosphere in the UK since the defeat of the 1984-85 Miners Strike.

For most workers it was the first time in their life that they had to

deal with complicated legal matters. At the beginning they relied on legal experts provided by the union - who turned out to be quite useless; it was activists with squatting experience who informed the occupiers that squatting was not illegal but merely unlawful (an important legal distinction defining severity of potential consequences).

The Basildon workers found documentary evidence suggesting that the closures had been planned for years, that the spin off of Visteon from Ford may have been part of a long term plan as the most convenient and cost-effective way of closing unprofitable parts of the business. Further evidence of long-term planning was shown by the fact that the management had protected their pensions by secretly moving them to another fund. Evidence was also found that one of the bosses had intentions to reopen the plant with cheaper labour later; so they paid a visit to this boss's country mansion. Unfortunately he was not at home and Visteon had already provided his house with security guard protection. The workers delivered a letter expressing their demands. (Video here; <http://libcom.org/news/video-visteon-factory-occupation-workers-go-bosss-house-08042009>)

Protest or class struggle?

The occupation coincided with the G20 protests in London's City financial centre, where around 10,000 activists gathered to express their anti-capitalism to the gathered world leaders. The City protests were leafletted to inform protestors of the Enfield occupation, but to little response. As was later commented on an internet forum;

"It was a real contrast to see how much energy and resources went into the organising of the G20 protests compared to how much support the Visteon occupation was given. This is partly an indication of the difference in priority, for some, given to activist protest on the one hand and class struggle on the other - and partly that many useful G20 resources [which could have been used at the occupation and, later, picket] had already returned to their sources outside London. [...] The occupation's been going for about 10 days now, and I doubt there's ever been much more than 300 people outside the factory, including workers, family and

friends, and SWP. In comparison with the thousands at G20, not all of whom, it's true, live in London; but many of whom are not 'class warriors' either and reject such an outlook."

Activists sometimes complain that unions, the state etc try to isolate struggles - but some people's political ideology does the job without any outside help.

In occupation

The occupation organised itself in an informal way - familiar workmates now found themselves together - but with their use and relation to the workplace transformed. Tasks were organised and carried out as needed and according to abilities.

Out of a total workforce of 227, the occupation was maintained by a hardcore of 70-80 ex-workers, plus a handful of supporters. One occupier, a libertarian socialist pensioner involved from the start of the occupation, described conditions;

"70 or so people sleeping in a paint shop , on work benches or the floor, or in chairs, is clearly a difficult position, Some were even without sleeping bags. People kipped down anywhere , though many of the women used a cubby hole that was both warmer and darker than outside,. The lights were always on, as some people were awake to ensure the barricaded entrances were safe. I slept on a work bench. Many people went home for washes or showers, and a soft mattress. Others stayed put, making do with baby-wipes for the time being." [...]

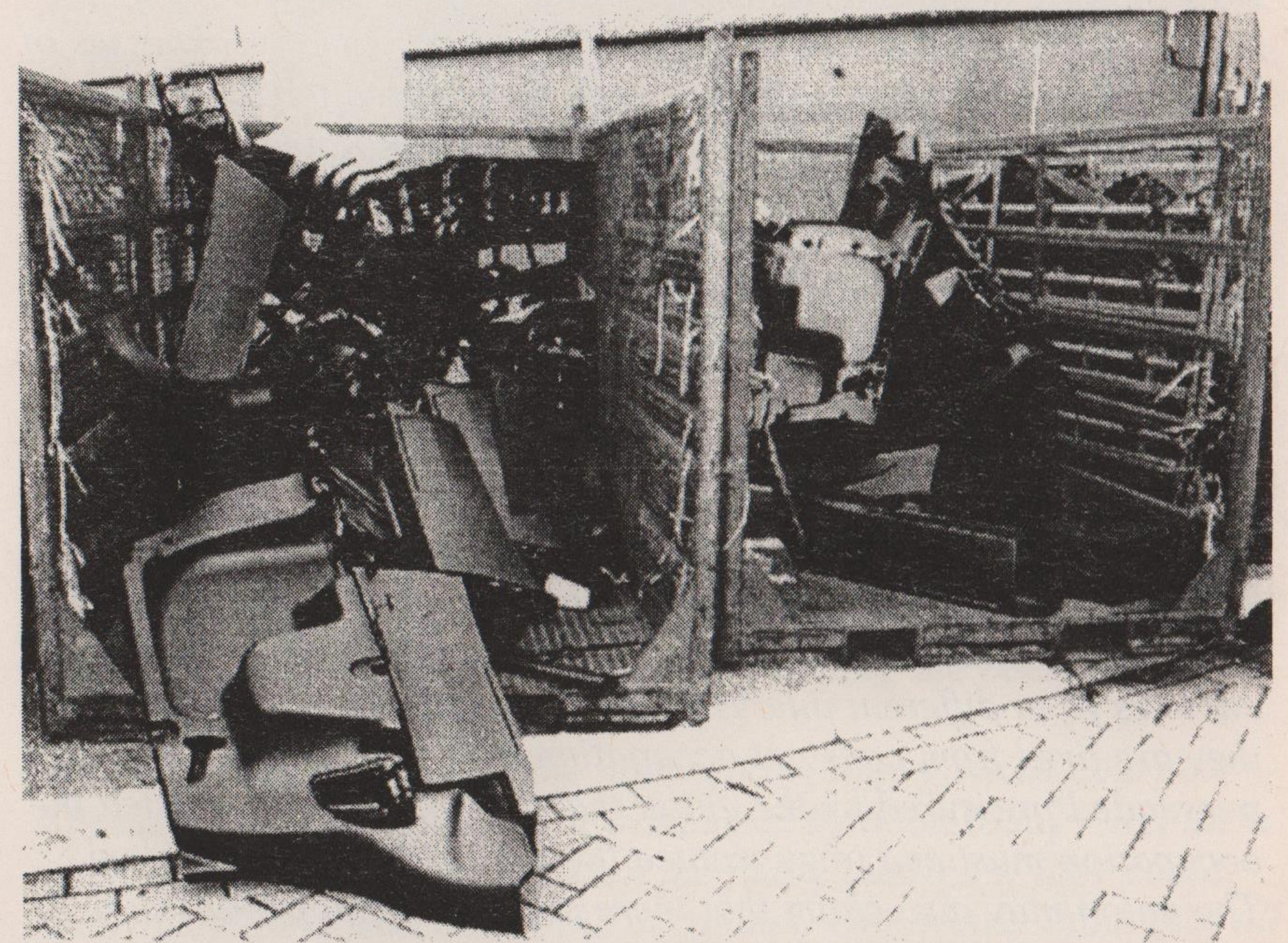
"Food. At first we were overwhelmed with food, specially bread and milk. S and D who ran the "canteen "area, kept everything in its place. The toaster and two microwaves were in frequent use. The area was very crowded especially in the evening when those on the roof came down." [...]

"The food was soon systematically organised." [...] "S P , chair of the Shop Stewards Committee, who had been in a family catering concern, would start early at home and cook up breakfasts for the 70 or so people who were here on average. This was home cooked food and high quality too.

The same was even more true of the evening meal . T. would go home and cook up two or three delicious chefs bowls of curry,

rice , pasta or what ever. This was really high quality. Selected contents, without the strong tasting ingredients of restaurants, was eagerly eaten and many had second helpings as well. It was excellent compensation for the hardship." (Ford Visteon Workers Occupation - an eyewitness account and first thoughts; Alan Woodward, CopyLeft, Gorter Press, c/o PO Box 45155, London N15 4SL.)

As the occupation continued, a support network emerged; a rally was called on the 4th day of occupation, a Saturday. Afterwards a meeting was called among the broadly anarchist and libertarian activists. A Support Group was set up, largely (but not exclusively) based around the existing Haringey Solidarity Group, a libertarian community activist grouping. For the rest of the occupation and subsequent 24hr pickets, it was this hardcore of around 15-20 people who provided most of the support to the ex-workers. This was important; the workers have stated that it was the surprising support they received that sustained them in their struggle. Leafletting, fundraising, publicity and picketing was all done as co-operative efforts between ex-workers and and supporters. This was not a workplace with a militant history, (though a few older



workers remembered a nine-week strike in the late '70s) and few had any experience of political activity. So, after the spontaneous decision to occupy, the solidarity that appeared - limited though it has been compared to earlier periods of class struggle - came as a welcome surprise.

The left groups appeared for various events and photo- and paper-selling opportunities(3) but - with one or two individual exceptions - provided very little active contribution to the struggle. In fact, their patronising attitude during the occupation resulted in SWP (Trotskyist - the UK's main left party) individuals being asked to leave.

After 9 days the occupation was ended on April 9th.

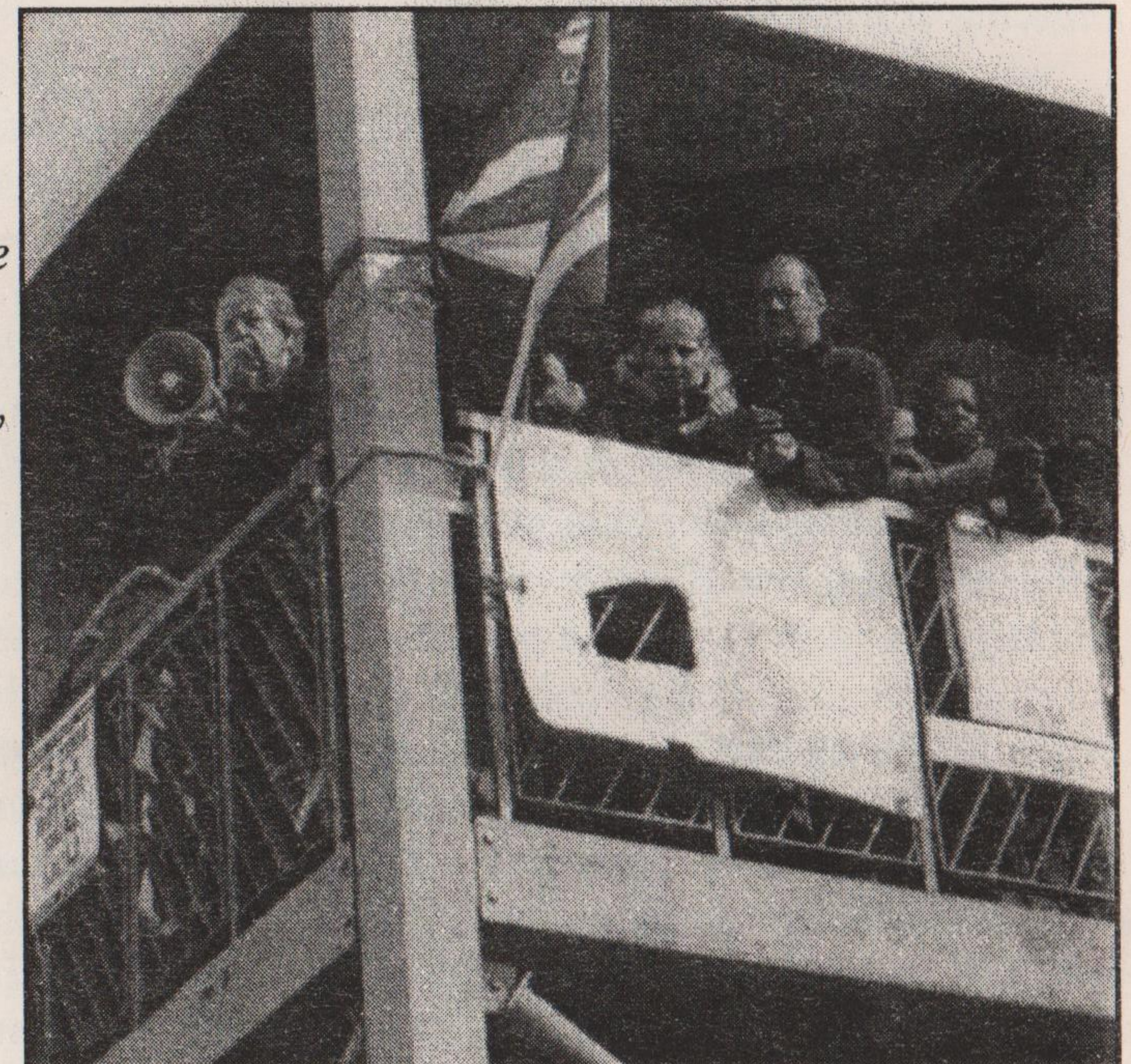
As we said at the time;

"The occupation was an inspiration for many - the spirit of the workers who refused to submit to being blatantly robbed by their bosses seemed to be what many had been waiting for, for far too long - the early possible signs of a resurgence of class struggle. Now that the occupation is ended without any clear victory in sight, some reflection is needed on the strengths and weaknesses of what has happened. It is always easy to be wise after the event, and necessary to be careful not to forget who initiated this struggle and took the risks. Any criticisms are as much of ourselves as supporters as of the occupiers. Still, we'll never get very far in developing our struggles if we don't reflect on where we went wrong and how we all might do things better next time.

The union persuaded the workers to end the occupation today (Thursday Apr 9th) without any details of the rumoured deal being made known to them. They are told all will be revealed on Tuesday. The obvious question is - why then not wait until Tuesday to decide whether to leave the factory? There will be different answers from different interested parties. Some workers may say they are tired from constant occupation and/or that they have been persuaded/pressured by the union that the bosses have insisted the occupation must end to guarantee the unspecified possible deal. The union may also claim that there could be legal penalties for

failing to comply with the undertaking given in court on Monday to leave the factory by noon today. But none of this appears very convincing or in the workers' interest; they have surrendered their greatest bargaining asset, the possession of the plant, its machinery and stock. So the negotiations restart on Tuesday from a weakened position for the workers. The picketing that is planned to replace the occupation will be less effective in preventing repossession of Visteon property. And legal threats can probably be applied to enforce restrictions on picketing activity too.

The rough conditions in the factory shouldn't be underestimated, but another few days might have made all the difference to the outcome that may determine the workers' long-term financial future. (The Ford



Unite bureaucrat addresses the Enfield workers, after persuading them to end the occupation.

pension fund is already 100s of millions in the red.) It had already been suggested that a rota system could've been set up, with help from supporters, to ease the strain of manning the occupation.

The union may claim that the undertaking they gave in court on Monday - that the occupation would end by noon today - left them open to legal penalties; but even the judge queried if they could guarantee the obedience of the occupiers. One would think that all

the union would've needed to do to protect themselves is to say that they had made an effort to persuade the occupiers to leave. The occupiers themselves could have stayed with no legal sanctions hanging over them other than a standard possession order common in squatting cases. The agreed undertaking with Visteon was that they would not seek possession while negotiations continue. Visteon - and the union - made that conveniently obsolete by agreeing to postpone revealing any details of the deal until Tuesday (if there even is any deal). One can speculate that if a really satisfactory deal was on offer the union would already be shouting it from the rooftops.

The union and the left have already begun to claim this struggle as a victory on the grounds that it forced the company to the negotiating table and that it has inspired other workers. These are partial truths, though any real assessment would have to be made after any deal is sealed. But the fact that the workers have been manoeuvred by the union into a vulnerable position where they could easily be screwed is something not to be glossed over, as the left will want to. This false optimism is only a means of repressing reflection on limits and strengths of what has happened, and a recipe for a repeat of the same errors in the future.

In the final meeting of occupiers no real opposition was expressed to the union's direction to walk out. This despite some occupiers in earlier conversation expressing a desire to carry on until a decent deal is struck. The same union convenors, who in the beginning had said they and the other occupiers would never leave until a satisfactory deal was agreed, were now obliged to convince the workers they must leave with nothing guaranteed, only rumours of a possible mysterious deal to come. Some in the meeting voiced serious criticisms of the union for keeping them in the dark about developments and not giving enough support to the occupation, but most were by now either relieved or resigned to walking out. The union's authority to ultimately decide the fate of the workers was not challenged. Early on in the occupation, when it was mentioned that the union might pressure an end to the occupation against workers' wishes, a couple of workers replied "ah, but we are the union", as if the workers' collective voice could control the union structure. But once negotiations were organised by officials

- on the other side of the world - and the whole process becomes remote and secret from the workers in the hands of specialists, they become dependent not on what they know, but on what they're told. And we know from long experience that the union hierarchy has its own vested interests to protect that often don't coincide with that of the workers.

[...]

But it is often awkward to stick one's neck out; given the general identification with the union, many supporters felt sensitive about being openly critical of the union and its underlying agenda, for fear of being seen to be divisive. But at the end of the day it's no good repressing these criticisms - or glossing them over for the sake of some image of unity - when only the explicit recognition of these realities may prevent defeat."

(<http://libcom.org/news/enfield-ford-visteon-occupation-ends-no-conclusion-10042009>)

The original court case brought by Visteon against the occupation on April 6th included the threat of legal sanctions (supposedly imprisonable offences) against two of the union convenors. The exact potential charges the union claimed were being threatened have never been explained; all that has been explicitly referred to are the possibility of costs being awarded against the convenors (which the union could have easily covered). Though UK injunction laws are draconian, this is another example of the union failing to inform the ex-workers of the full facts - which, deliberately or not, made it easier for the union to pressure workers to comply with the union's wishes.

From a video of the final occupation meeting, showing the union explaining why it must end, (video here - <http://libcom.org/news/video-visteon-workers-eviction-enfield-14042009>) it's apparent that scare tactics, deliberately vague information and dubious advice were used. The legal arguments and assessment of risks were extremely dubious, on several grounds. If the occupiers had refused to leave and the case had gone back to court it could have been argued in Unite and the occupiers' defence that the undertaking was originally to give time for negotiations to occur. But as the company did not announce any offer at the previously agreed deadline of Thurs 12 noon - the

occupiers were then freed from keeping their side of the bargain to vacate the premises. But union bureaucrats don't like things like occupations - they get insecure when they see workers taking initiative for themselves.

Only shortly before the Visteon occupation, other workers had broken the law with no prosecution occurring. Prison officers are legally banned from industrial action but had taken action recently. The prison officers' union leader justified their action with, for a screw, quite ironic words; "The right to strike is the only defence of our freedom. If this means breaking the law, we are prepared for this".

The same week as the occupation the NUT and NAHT teachers' unions were preparing to boycott the SATS test for children aged 11 from next year. They planned to get votes at their Conferences. This was clearly illegal, as government Ministers proclaimed on television. This would arguably be a "conspiracy" to breach the law - a criminal offence punishable by prison. The recent Lindsey oil refinery wildcat strikes also escaped any legal sanction. Similarly, the Belfast Ford-Visteon occupation suffered no legal penalties.

The evidence suggests that the government wanted the Ford Visteon dispute dealt with sensitively. As one of the first major disputes of the credit crisis, with redundancy and pensions the issues, its handling - and possibly workers' responses - would be a template for future company bankruptcies. A heavy-handed violent eviction of workers who had been blatantly robbed by their employers after a lifetime of employment would be likely to inflame the situation by informing the millions of soon-to-be-unemployed of what they might also expect. As other companies fail, the government is worried that things might escalate.

Meanwhile, Belfast remained in occupation and the company - realising the greater local support there and history of militancy - had not yet applied to the courts for possession proceedings. When the court possession papers did arrive at Belfast, the occupiers ceremoniously burned them and remained in occupation. A supporter described the situation there:

"Since 2000 the negotiation has been an ongoing process. The '520' agreement said that workers at one of Ford's 'Visteon' plants had the right to work in another Ford plant as Ford employees. At one point when a 'Visteon' plant in England was shedding jobs many of the employees flowed to a nearby Ford plant and replaced outsourced workers with temporary contracts. The workers at Visteon plants in England have nearby Ford plants in which they are potentially eligible for work, for example the Ford plant in Bridgend was 11 miles from the Swansea Visteon plant [both plants in Wales]. However in Belfast, there is no such nearby plant. The 520 agreement only applies if the workers go to a Ford plant, so obviously the Belfast workers in Finaghy feel this plant closure is ripping the heart out of their community (the majority of whom are from greater Belfast area and a significant minority of which are directly from the immediate Finaghy/West Belfast area.

This is perhaps why the focus of the campaign is not on redundancy pay (as has been reported in the news) but rather the focus is on keeping the factory open. "I don't want a redundancy package," one worker told me. It was Belfast workers refusal to leave that inspired similar direct action resistance at the two other



The struggle reaches the High Court

closing Visteon plants in Basildon and Enfield (England). On Wednesday a supporters' march with a couple hundred people started at a local shopping centre and walked out to the occupied plant. The Northern Ireland Parades Commission normally requires 28 days notice before any kind of march can happen (because sectarian marches have resulted in violence). However the police were down to the plant the day before to fast track the permission process so that the March could go forward legally. Support for the Belfast workers occupation has so far been very strong from all quarters."

With the end of the Enfield occupation, to retain any leverage in negotiations it became essential to prevent stock and machinery being removed from the plant. (Of the three plants, Enfield held the most valuable company property - including expensive plastic moulding machinery.) 24hr picketing of the plant's five gates began. Still the union failed to provide any resources; braziers, portaloos, tents and a caravan being provided by ex-workers and supporters. The ex-workers were by now very disillusioned by the union - but at the same time the union's lack of support meant they began to learn some skills of collective self-organisation.

Unite - a force for isolation

In the car industry the economic crisis means most workers are now on reduced hours. As a relatively well paid manual job, most car workers have mortgages and other debt commitments, so the increased economic insecurity in the present crisis meant workers were unwilling to risk their income for on-the-job solidarity action with the ex-Ford-Visteon workers. But most of the finances were coming from local union branches (not just car workers) sending donations via the support group; though the union finally, after 3 weeks, coughed up some cash. Unite also failed to mention the dispute on their website or send out information to local union branches - showing their real attitude to the dispute and concern to keep it isolated. As the dispute went on, ex-workers' disillusionment with the union increased to a permanent cynicism - unsurprisingly, given their lack of support and Unite's failure to keep ex-workers informed. Many felt their convenors were too close to, or influenced by, the union bosses and that this affected

their ability to act in the best interests of all. But, without having space here to say much, we must note that any criticism of the union must recognise that it is not simply - as some supporters and



workers have implied - that the union is 'not doing its job properly', but that it is doing its job all too well as a capitalist institution. As always, it has prioritised its own organisational interests and tried to limit workers' gains to what can be accommodated to those interests and to the wider interests of the economy.

Union bureaucrats helping Nu Labour manage capitalism in crisis The close political and financial relationship between UK unions and the Labour Party continues (often rewarded by a seat and title in the House of Lords for retired union bosses). Disputes like this make clear that unions are one of the mechanisms by which the financial crisis will be managed for capital. The 55% stake taken by America's UAW union in Chrysler is another example - the deal includes a no-strike agreement until 2015!

The first round

Meanwhile, convenors from the three plants were flown out to the US, alongside Unite bosses, to negotiate with Visteon bosses. Ford bosses refused to participate - they still denied any obligation to

their former workers. Therefore a satisfactory deal was always unlikely to be won from these negotiations. According to one report, the convenors were not present in the meetings, but were left in the bar while the bosses on both sides decided the fate of 'their' workers.

After this first round of negotiations an offer was made by the administrators - but this was simply 90 day's wages, which was the minimum statutory obligation anyway! In response to this insult the Enfield pickets now reinforced the barricades around the factory exits. The 24hr picketing was, unsurprisingly, proving far more difficult to sustain than an occupation. But rotas were organised and, between ex-workers and supporters, a presence was kept on the 5 gates. Ford dealerships around the country were also being regularly picketted and leafletted. One account;

"On a Saturday afternoon, 3 of us went to leaflet a Ford dealership in Waltham Cross. There wasn't a lot of pedestrian traffic - but the dealership was on a corner of a crossroads with traffic lights. So we started leafletting cars as they stopped, waiting for the lights to change - getting out on the road among the cars, giving leaflets thru windows. Then Ian (ex-worker), his partner and daughter joined us - Ian in white boiler suit with "toot for the workers" painted on his back, and they brought placards, whistles and plenty of energy and noise. So we got a good number of cars honking support and taking leaflets, plus some pedestrians. And talking to one not very sympathetic worker who came out of the dealership - who questioned the point of us being there and complained "we're not Ford, we're just a dealership who sell their cars"! - she confirmed that, though management don't work weekends, they would have been informed by e-mail of our presence."

A New Deal

While the 70-80 active Enfield ex-workers had been maintaining occupation and then picketing the other nearly 200 ex-workers had been passively waiting at home (or seeking other work). When a new improved deal was then announced, many of these passive 200 suddenly reappeared to find out what was on offer, causing understandable resentment. The improved offer was in response to

a threat from the sacked Visteon workers to begin picketting the profitable Ford low emission engine plant at Bridgend - the one Ford UK plant still running at full capacity and an essential part of their supply chain. This apparently followed a meeting of Ford Unite convenors in London, where it had been arranged to send delegations of ten ex-workers each from the three plants.



Ford found this more threatening than the previous solitary visits to Ford plants to ask Ford workers to black

Visteon products - they didn't like the idea of ex-Visteon people actually trying to picket out Ford workers. This brought Ford to the negotiating table; they brought the Chairman and CEO of Ford Europe to negotiate with the Joint General Secretary of Unite - Unite then told the ex-workers to call off the Bridgend picket.

There may have also been pressure from the UK government on Ford to offer an improved deal; if Ford-Visteon were to set a precedent for companies of avoiding all financial obligations in such workplace closures this would massively increase the amount the state would have to pay out in benefits in future to sacked workers. (Whereas if workers receive redundancy payouts they cannot claim benefits until that money has been spent - the state specifies how long one can 'reasonably' be expected to live on specific sums. So one cannot just blow the redundancy on a flash car and holidays in the sun, then stroll into the dole office expecting money. Unfortunately...) As other global motor giants

crash, Ford may also have taken into account their position as, at present, the comparatively healthy survivor of the car industry. If they are to maintain this dominant position, they may feel the need to maintain a minimum reputation as an employer who pays up in the eyes of present and future employees.

While the new offer was being considered, some supporters organised a Mayday picket of KPMG, the accountancy firm administering the receivership procedure of Visteon. They would decide how much all the creditors, including the ex-workers, would get from remaining assets. The weather was kind, and a sunny day found us outside their offices with around 60 people; a small mobile sound system also turned up with music and some Ford-Visteon ex-workers used its microphone to express their disgust at their treatment. A leaflet was distributed:

"KPMG: Those who helped make the crisis now profit from it KPMG are one of the biggest accountancy companies in the world, offering 'creative auditing', profit laundering and tax avoidance advice to big business
(<http://visar.csustan.edu/aaba/Davosspeech.pdf>) *They are currently facing a \$1billion lawsuit for malpractices in the US subprime market that contributed to the present economic crisis. Now they are acting as 'administrators' for Ford-Visteon motor company - helping to rob sacked employees of their redundancy pay and pensions. This is why we are picketing KPMG today."* [...]

"Putting people into misery: KPMG are protecting the motor giants' profits by withholding what is owed to the workers, threatening their homes and futures -Some workers now face repossession orders and many others could lose their homes too, if Ford, Visteon and KPMG get away with their dirty tricks." [...]

"KPMG's job is to protect the profits of capitalists at the expense of those who create the wealth- all through the dispute, they have rejected the workers' claims and demands, using the same excuses as the Ford-Visteon bosses that "The company is insolvent. Ford and Visteon UK are completely separate companies". KPMG have used threats of injunctions and sought possession orders in court against the workers' factory occupations.

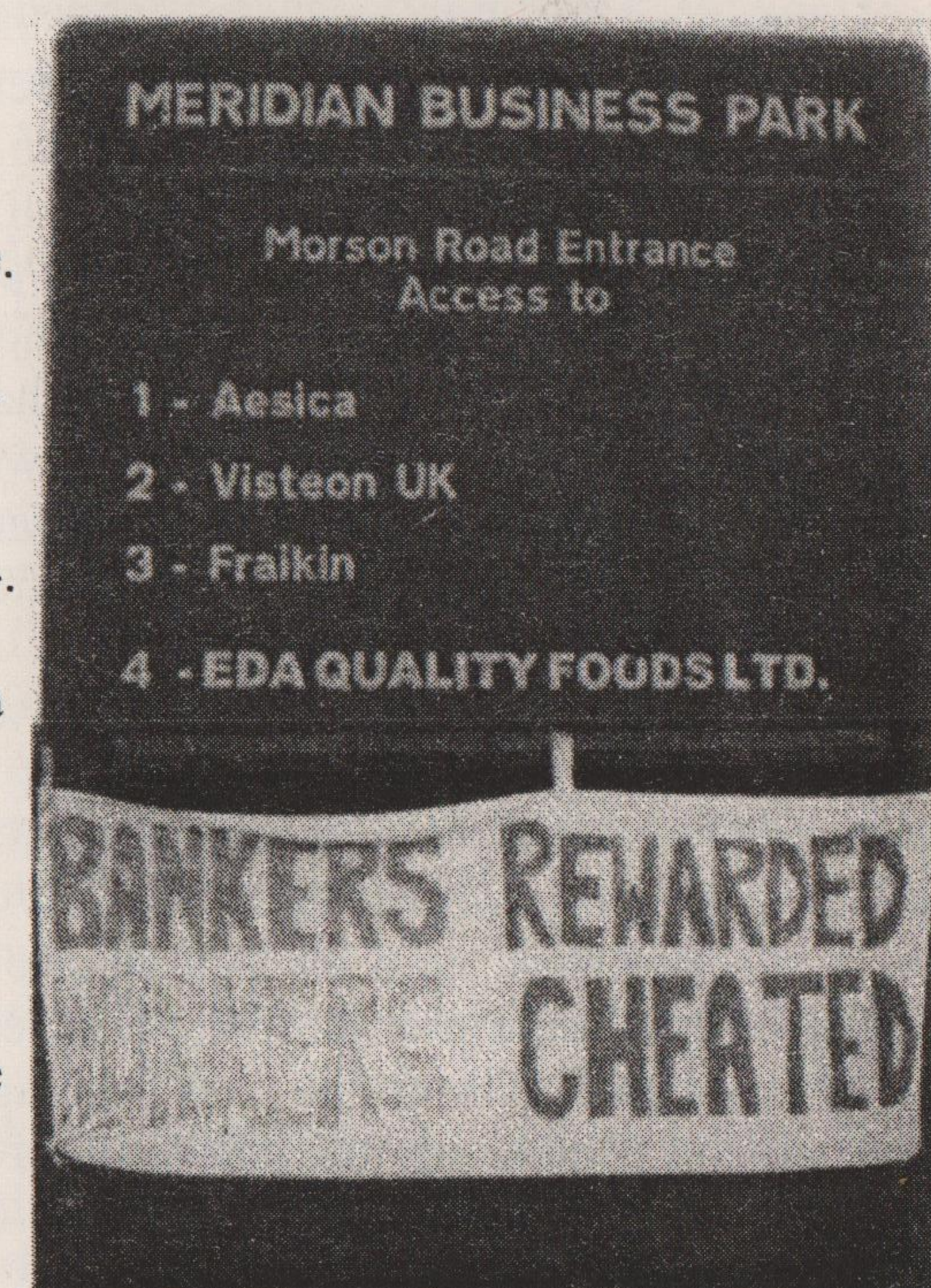
Support the workers! But the sacked Ford-Visteon workers are bravely standing up to Ford, Visteon and KPMG- not just for

themselves, but for all of us affected by the recession. The attempted theft of their redundancy pay and pensions is how many bosses are sacking and robbing workers-with suitable advice from the likes of KPMG, of course. So the Ford-Visteon workers fight is the fight of all vulnerable workers - support them!"

The vote on the offer

Prior to voting, Enfield workers had the details of the deal read out to them by convenors, and some saw a handwritten version of its points. In their haste to get the vote passed and get this regrettable outbreak of industrial unrest concluded so they could go back the smooth and tidy bureaucratic functions of trade unionism, it was too much to expect the union to type and print out a copy for each worker to study and so vote on their long-term financial futures in the most informed way. The vote on the deal was deliberately arranged by the union so that Enfield and Basildon voted on it on the Friday, May 1st; then Belfast, still in occupation and with a more militant reputation, would vote on the Sunday. So, inevitably, the acceptance of the deal at Enfield and Basildon was designed to encourage acceptance at the Belfast vote. All plants did vote acceptance; the Enfield vote was 178 to 5 and Basildon was 159 to 0. Belfast voted 147 to 34.

Soon after the euphoria of the securing of an improved deal and the acceptance vote, workers began to wonder what exactly they had voted for. The normal shift patterns workers had been on for years had changed



in the last months leading up to the plant closure - when workers were working shorter weeks - and these shift patterns were used as part of the calculation of payments. So no one was clear how it would all add up for them. Since then, workers seemed to have gained a clearer idea and, rightly see it as a partial victory - and worth the struggle. They have won as much as 10 times the original offer. But one small group of ex-workers - 'CCRs' employed after Visteon took over(4) - had inferior non-Ford contracts and so were given smaller payments. Some workers - both CCRs and ex-Ford - saw this as unnecessarily divisive and blamed both Ford-Visteon and union bosses for this; but, still, there was some resentment between workers about the disparity and at the failure by the rest of the workers to stick it out for a uniform deal (though at Belfast it was rumoured that other workers would each donate £300 to compensate for the shortfall in CCR payments). It's unfortunate that some are leaving the dispute with such feelings. Part of the reason for this is probably;

1) through the dispute workers didn't hold enough regular general meetings so they could insist on being fully informed of what was developing and could discuss it between themselves as a whole group. So, eg, at Enfield cliques around certain gates formed (people tending to always be picketting on the same gates), without enough contact/debate between all workers.

2) Prior to the vote, the union didn't give people a printed document of settlement terms and time enough to consider the deal, discuss and seek advice on it and what it meant for each individual and for different groups of ex-workers. This rushing through of acceptance was clearly deliberate by the union, as was the arrangement whereby Belfast voted after Enfield & Basildon.

Remaining outstanding issues are; the ex-workers' pensions - this will be decided by a (possibly 2 year-long) court case, unfortunately conducted on workers' behalf by the union's so-far incompetent (but no-doubt expensive) lawyers. If little comes of this, ex-workers have been led to expect to receive 60-90% compensation of their pension from a government scheme. But, whereas the pension would be paid from age 58, government compensation begins only at 65. (A more recent calculation has suggested that workers may only get 45% of their original pension under this scheme. As usual, the union has been slow in informing

itself and its members of the accurate facts of the pensions issue.)

Rob Williams, a militant union convenor at another spun-off plant, Linamar (formerly Visteon) in Swansea, was sacked for his support of the sacked Ford/Visteon workers. (He was visiting other workplaces encouraging support for the dispute, though this was presumably done only through union channels at convenor level rather than directly appealing to the workforce.) Williams then barricaded himself in his office and workers walked out in his support; he was eventually reinstated under suspension. Shortly after he was permanently sacked. Management removed the door to his office to prevent another barricading and foremen threatened workers with the sack if they walked out again (see .

<http://libcom.org/news/swansea-union-convenor-sacked-supporting-fordvisteon-workers-28042009>). A support campaign has been organised demanding his reinstatement and Linamar workers in Swansea have voted 139-19 (with a turn out of 88%) for an indefinite strike to force Williams' reinstatement. Probably also prompted by wider issues, such as recent management intimidation, looming redundancies etc. (*Stop Press, 10 June 09: Rob Williams has been reinstated due to this threat of strike action!*)

The business of unions as mediators and defenders of capitalist exploitation

This dispute shows, once again, the contradictions and limits of a rank'n'file level of unionism; shop steward and convenor positions - often taken by the most militant workers - must mediate between shop floor interests and the union bureaucracy's organisational interests. Workers often see the union as an organisational framework giving them a collective identity and protective strength; and on a day to day level it often does so, within existing conditions and agreements. What workers often don't acknowledge (or fail to act upon) is that this strength is their own power mediated by the union structure as its representation - and therefore limited by it; a power that has the potential to conflict with and go beyond both the control of their employers and their union leaders. This conflict was made explicit in this dispute when many workers saw that the union was more interested in doing

things through its own bureaucratic channels over and above their heads while giving no practical help to the struggle on the ground. This was undoubtedly a mixture of bureaucrats' instinctive dislike for spontaneous outbursts of workers' unrest - which threaten the smooth functioning and efficient reputation of unions - and an attitude whereby bureaucrats assume they're the experts who always know best how to handle these situations. But it was also indicative of a class relation; unions are generally run today primarily as financial service brokers - "negotiating deals on insurance, mortgages and pensions, medical cover, holidays and car breakdown services" etc - and investment funds with a sideline in industrial arbitration. Unite boss Derek Simpson, close friend of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, earns more than the PM. A free £800,000 house for life, nearly £200,000 of pay and benefits, 17% pay rises etc, he stays in £400 a night hotel rooms when on union business. Undoubtedly Gordie and Del have discussed how best to manage worker unrest during the present crisis in the best interests of the capitalist system that rewards them so well for their management.

Unions are partly an organisational manifestation of the immediate limits of workers' own aspirations, values and confidence (and, under normal circumstances, usually the limits of the actual realistic possibilities in a given situation - workers do want a deal negotiated). Often stewards are the most militant and pro-strike of the workforce. By their participation workers animate unions.

The potential struggle against union domination is one within and between workers to overcome the contradiction of being labour power bought and sold and moving beyond that; but workers have to live and eat this side of the revolution! They don't just accept unions because they're naive/lack consciousness - alongside their cynicism, they know unions deliver something and to be without a union would usually be even worse under present conditions. (Those employers who want union-free workplaces want to be free of certain union-mediated obligations.)

Any real break by workers with unions will come from confronting the limits of these contradictions in practice - and, insofar as it occurs within a unionised workforce, will probably occur as

something emerging out of the union and the role of union militants/stewards (as a radicalisation of stewards and/or a confrontation with their role). That doesn't mean one has to advocate a struggle within unions (though rank'n'filism etc inevitably occurs) - it means recognising that workers' power is expressed within union structures, but is not inevitably forever bounded by the limits of union forms. It spills over, makes partial breaks, is usually reincorporated or lapses into a new form of mediation. And we seek to encourage that break further in real struggles - as a development of taking control of our own struggles rather than passively accepting the representation of union or other mediation specialists. Most of the time that occurs at most on a small scale so we are limited by the existing mediation process.

The ability to pursue interests and demands within the union form - and for the form to at the same time function as a limit on radical developments - is a key to understanding its continued strength.

A real workplace radicalisation would see workers not only in conflict with management and union bosses - but also some conflict between stewards and workers, ie, between those stewards and other workers for and against confronting/organising against



the union - and also would mean workers confronting their own fears and lack of confidence in making these breaks, confronting their own habits of 'leaving it to the experts' - be they union

officials or perhaps even the future emerging specialist council delegates of workers councils set up in radical opposition to unions. (In the Russian Revolution, for example, there was a 'bureaucratisation from below' as well as from the ruling party above; factory, district & soviet committee delegates spent more and more time away from the workplace on delegate business and so gradually became permanent representatives/bureaucrats.)

So the working class doesn't only have to defeat external enemies, it has to confront and overcome what internally perpetuates its existence as the working class; the above-mentioned fears and lack of confidence, old habits and structures and their accompanying values, thought patterns, hierarchies etc. Some of these questions were hinted at during the Visteon dispute - but things never developed far enough to really confront these contradictions. This is not just a remote 'question of revolutionary strategy' - it is a concrete question of how most effectively to conduct struggles now. Under present conditions this inevitably often means confronting union control of struggles - and it is this that has potentially radical implications.

After 48 days - on Monday 18th May the Ford-Visteon workers ended the dispute at all 3 plants. Partial though the victory is, and with all the limits and weakness it contained, the struggle is highly significant. The ex-workers have achieved more than might have been expected (particularly after Enfield ended their occupation, and despite the absence of solidarity action by other car workers). Despite the pensions uncertainty, under present conditions and compared to most UK labour disputes of the last 25 years it is a pretty good result; and it sends a much more encouraging signal to workers who will face similar situations.

- A supporter

June 2009

(Thanks to Frank, Conor, Georgia & others who provided info.)

For various documents and comments on the dispute, see;

<http://libcom.org/search/node/visteon>

<http://libcom.org/tags/visteon-occupation>

Footnotes

1) 17 or so Enfield workers were not sacked but kept on by Visteon. The plan was that they would be used later to prepare stock and machinery for removal from the factory. But in the meantime some of these workers were involved in the occupation and picketing - and when the company called them in to work the ex-workers and supporters group responded by circulating a general call-out which brought a larger presence on the picket lines. All the workers (but one, a manager?) refused to cross the picket line, rendering their skills useless to Ford-Visteon.

2) Convenors are workers elected/appointed from the stewards in large factory complexes with different shops and processes. The nearest equivalent in other workplaces would be branch secretary (the branch may or may not cover a single workplace). So the difference relates to whether a union is organised by workplace or branch.

Basically, the branch secretary or convenor have a direct link to the union regional structure and gain legitimacy and influence from that relationship, a legitimacy not so easily gained by a steward. Convenors and branch secretaries are usually entitled to varying levels of paid time off for union duties.

Historically, shop stewards' committees gained their legitimacy from the rank'n'file power they wielded, which forced the district and regional union officials to take notice of the shopfloor. The decision-making process in Enfield illustrates how much that relatively independent power has been eroded and so the terms do not have quite the same resonance these days. In times past convenors apparently worked the day shift and were compensated for loss of shift allowance by levies raised on the shop floor.

3) For example, when the Enfield occupation ended, there had been very little recent presence of the SWP around the plant. But they put a general call out to members to attend; *"As the occupiers came out, the SWP - never ones to miss an opportunist photo-opportunity - swamped the crowd with their placards and chanted 'the workers united will never be defeated'. Under the circumstances, this had a hollow and ironic ring. It began to feel, as nearly every strike has in the past 20+ years - like one more*

predictable stitch up by union bureaucrats - more interested in helping Nu Labour manage capitalism in crisis than feeling the need to win even modest gains for workers."
(<http://libcom.org/news/enfield-ford-visteon-occupation-ends-no-conclusion-10042009>)

4) CCR stands for Competitive Cost Rate, apparently introduced for newer employees at Visteon to relate their pay to the going current rate in the industry, not the pay of Visteon staff on existing or Ford mirrored terms and conditions. The argument of the ex-Visteon CCRs appeared to be that the union was negligent in allowing these differentials to develop for what was presumably the same job.

This is a longer version of an article originally written on request for Wildcat (Germany) shortly after the end of the Ford-Visteon dispute.



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Past Tense
c/o 56a info Shop
56 Crampton Street,
London,
SE17 3AE

email: pasttense@alphabetthreat.co.uk

www.past-tense.org.uk

this text is also online at:

<http://libcom.org/history/report-reflections-uk-ford-visteon-dispute-2009-post-fordist-struggle>