

Table of Contents

Class struggle in the automotive industry: will it step on the gas? 1

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Contrary to what immaterialists and Demoradicals might tell you, manufacturing in general and the car industry in particular is *expanding* rather than contracting in Europe, albeit in Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic rather than at Longbridge, Dagenham or Turin. (Beverly Silver's book *Forces of labour*, reviewed in the current *Aufheben* demonstrates that there's nothing epochal or even surprising about this kind of gradual geographical shift.) This text, reproduced on Libcom.org, is a translation of the preface to a book of workers' inquiry and analysis by the KPK (Collectively Against Capital) group, focusing on technical vs political class composition at German carmaker/hedge fund Volkswagen-Porsche's Czech subsidiary Skoda

Preface to the bulletin "Class Struggle In The Automotive Industry: Will It Step On The Gas?" published by Kolektivne proti kapitalu (Collectively Against Capital, KPK) in June 2007

Introduction

In this bulletin you will find several texts which are connected by the car industry issue. The central material offers a basic sketch of the situation of the car industry in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia. Then there's our report on the negotiation of the collective agreement in Å koda. The leaflet which we distributed in front of Å koda factories sums up our view of possibilities of workers' struggle. An important view from inside Å koda is then expressed by an anonymous appeal which was spread within the factory before the negotiation via electronic mail. Scepticism towards trade union "representatives" of workers is illustrated by an anonymous rhyme which appeared on the wall in one Å koda workshop during one of the past negotiations (and which is a workers' slap to the annoying "song of the Å koda trade unions" which was composed by a Å koda union boss during this year's bargaining).

However, before this, it is necessary to answer the question why (and how) we should be concerned with something as boring as the car industry.

I)

Actually... we can clearly say that we are living in boring times. What is challenging them? Communism was discredited by (state) capitalism before November 1989. It just put on the appearance of it with no open working class expression and with the trade unions integrated into capitalism so as to perform the task of pacifier and tool of social peace very successfully. There is no doubt about this, but does it mean that communism can be postponed to times in which revolution is more chic? Certainly not. Class antagonism certainly didn't fade away – and communism is for us not an ideal state of affairs but a real movement which grows up from the contradictions of capitalist society. And it is necessary to look for it there – with all our attention on material reality. Of course, abstraction is essential, it is necessary to get to what is important and not just look at surface appearances, but it is fundamental to avoid ideologisation – to avoid using political notions and concepts without any connection with concrete class reality. While it is true that a car produced under capitalism will be always simply a commodity containing exploitation, to end things here would mean to ignore the concrete shape of exploitation, of organisation of work etc. which certainly makes a difference. The critique which we are concerned with is a practical one. Class struggle has its material basis and communism grows from it - it will not be imposed from the realm of metaphysics and ultra-radical sounding phrases and slogans. Class struggle isn't led by some abstract proletariat but springs from and is influenced by particular forms of exploitation. The dictatorship of capital has

invariant features like the existence of classes, commodity relations... but what actually exists in its framework is just concrete class, concrete exploitation and concrete struggle.

But if we want to avoid ideology it is necessary to not end up in the trap of empiricism or some version of “radical sociology” which would maybe be just some intellectual-revolutionary fad around how “to do something in unfavourable times” or to get “knowledge”. We look at the world around us “antagonistically”, from a class perspective. It is not just about mapping the situation but about interrogating the class terrain, identifying the actual balance of power between the proletariat and capital, weak points of the enemy and potential possibilities for the struggle.

What we call a struggle survey (which corresponds to the method called “workers inquiry” in English and „die militante Untersuchung“ in German) seeks to link theory and practice. We cannot say one word of communist critique without knowing the concrete (historical and up-do-date) reality of exploitation.

The pivotal political presumption is for us without doubt the centrality of the proletariat: if the revolution for the overthrow of capitalism happens it will be led by the working class. But in the same way that the notion of “working class” is sometimes condemned to death as an archaism it is also sometimes presented as a self-evident category which doesn’t need to be discussed – and many automatic definitions fly about. There are those which try to stuff the proletariat into a sociological pigeon-hole as well as those which base its existence exclusively on subjective criteria. But what it is the proletariat? Is it a class which exists absolutely separately, independently of capital, as a romantically clean negation of its opponent which we can always rely on? Is not the proletariat rather a class linked to capital in a contradictory way as something which reproduces it? Is it possible to define the proletariat as a class of victims – those on whom capital has imposed the necessity to sell their labour power (to be exploited) in order to survive in an undignified way? Doesn’t this sorrowful view rather ignore the fact that the proletariat is a class who are the only people that have the destructive power to block the capitalist mode of production, to stop it – and to bring it to its end? Actually it is this last question which indicates why the proletariat is the central subject for the abolition of capitalism; however it is its more concrete implications which are in front of us at the present time.

Similarly one deals with a number of notions and concepts – class consciousness is one of them. In fact, in the hands of certain “revolutionaries” it is even the ideological weapon par excellence. But can we take something like consciousness, class perception, and workers’ subjectivity and touch it more concretely? We deal with economic data, statistics about the profitability of enterprises or industrial sectors, analyses from the news or the union press: this is something that we have been mainly dependent on until now, but there are also (as part of a struggle survey) talks with workers (with questions which don’t compel a “contrived” answer). What are their experiences? How do they see their place at work, in everyday conflicts (which happen under the surface, behind the gates of workplaces but are not officially talked about... which leads many people from the “radical scene” to the resigned disillusion that “there is nothing happening”)? Can they perceive the possibility of collective power? How the class is formed in its interaction with capital can be testified to by the concept of class composition which holds “technical composition” to be the conditions under which capital makes the working class while “political composition” is the process by which workers turn technical composition against capital, using their position in the labour force as a starting point of the struggle.

Similarly just as it is not about neutral investigation, nor is it about propaganda (for a free society or whatever...) nor about wooing workers into existing or new, “radical” trade unions nor about a somehow long-running campaign for mobilisation first here and then there. General slogans are impotent, trade unions as permanent economic organisations are integrated into the capitalist state (“mainstream” ones) or on the road towards this integration (new, “radical” ones). Struggles can’t be induced. It is rather the “long story”, a general political approach to reality around us which closely

relates to meaningful intervention and which can be a tool of workers self-organisation. Tensions, small day-to-day “wars”, conflicts exist even before the fight eventually explodes, and radical minorities (not that dreamt-of, “perfect” proletariat but workers of flesh and blood) which act within them are a fundamental reference point. Their connecting together is what can lay the foundations of the long process of constitution of the autonomy of the working class when the class or part of it starts to “egoistically” follow its own interests, despite and against political parties and unions. And only if the class starts to act as independent political subject (and we believe that a birth of real political proletarian organisation emerging from the unification of radical minorities will be a contribution towards it) can it change the world.

This is just a few introductory words about the political method in the struggle for the abolition of the capitalist mode of production and the state. What follows provides rather more signposts and questions than answers, but a recognition that things are more complex is a more useful ally in the struggle than hot-blooded megalomania. After all, a road towards a forcible response which is rather complicated and full of doubts which one must carefully deal with is preferable to rigid dogmas... and we are living in times where stayers are needed more than sprinters.

II)

However, before the text itself, we still have to answer the question: “Why just the car industry”? Firstly we don’t think that it is unimportant where class struggles happen – at which points in the framework of the social production process, to what degree it is important for the accumulation of capital, which form of organisation of work they grow out of.

As far as the importance for capital goes, it was without doubt that the car industry was a key sector in Western Europe from the Second World War till the beginning of 80’s. It was a pillar of the post-war boom, it sucked up thousands of workers from the countryside into towns, it unified, on the basis of technologies and an organisation of work which “streamed” into other parts of the social productive process, workers experience, and, last but not least, it was a centre of the international division of labour which crossed the borders of particular sectors. At the same time the car became a social symbol of wealth which you can participate in only through submission to the dictatorship of the factory.

Struggles in the car industry in post-war Europe thus also encouraged struggles in other sectors and operated as a factor of unification (1) - in the same way as they did before in the USA in the 30’s and 40’s of the 20th century or afterwards in Latin American and since the 1980’s in some of the Asian countries.

Although some express the opinion that the key role of the car industry in the framework of the accumulation process (and thus also in the framework of the class struggle process) belongs to the last century (in the same way that the key role of the textile industry belongs to the 19th century), we think that the potential of the car sector is still far from being exhausted. It has not been practically proven that the place of the car industry in the framework of the capitalist production cycle has been occupied by some other sector. The IT bubble burst several “long” years ago and all the talk about “services” can’t hide the fact that they are merely a long tentacle of the classical factory and that in themselves they do not form an independent sector which could start a new cycle of capital accumulation in the way that was achieved by Ford and his factory a hundred years ago. Thus even today the accumulation of capital to a large extent stands or falls by the car industry, and struggles in the car industry undoubtedly have a greater power to hit capital than, for instance, workers in fast foods or libraries (although when we are concerned with the transformation of proletarian experience/consciousness it is necessary not to underestimate any struggle!!).

Even the superficial observer finds out, even without statistics and “hard data”, that in the Central and East European regions the car industry starts to sprout from every “green field site”. If he then has recourse to those hard data he will find out that the reality really is like that although, so far, this generalisation is only good on the level of capital accumulation, not on the level of open struggle.

The other factor is the character of the organisation of work. Workers struggles adopt different forms because concrete labour processes are different – and thus so are material forms of exploitation. For the development and fruitfulness of collective struggles we have to look at the level of workers cooperation in the framework of the concrete labour process, as well as at the framework of the whole social process of production and the degree of concentration of workers. Political unification of struggles is then dependent on the extent to which they succeed in developing along the lines of social production and hitting capital in its strategic points.

However, the key position does not need to be that of certain sectors, it can also be certain regions. In the past it was, for example, miners' regions, today it might be a matter of seaports, special industrial zones, where we see a high concentration of production - well-known examples are the maquiladoras in northern Mexico, special economic zones in China, the region of west Poland, the region of the central and northern Czech Republic or northern Moravia. In these "centres of development" the connection between the state and capital (investment incentives, guaranteed infrastructure construction by the state, labour market policy, special norms etc.) and at the same time the "globality" of these companies ("foreign investors", migration of workers etc.) are particularly evident. We do not want to claim that without these "key regions" no significant development of struggles can happen (and the same applies to key sectors). However, the defeat of (strike) movements is often related to the fact that "the centres" either don't join struggles or that struggles within them are defeated (2).

In the case of the car industry we are talking about a production chain where every operation must be quite well-ordered and which is dependent on accurate and timely supply (just-in-time). The car industry operates here almost as a pioneer of new methods of production and the organisation of work (new in terms of their spreading into social production as a whole) as well as a motor of "new" industrialisation. But at the same time this sector is possibly very vulnerable to struggles because of the high degree of workers cooperation within the framework of the production cycle across this whole branch which even extends outside it (for example transport, production of electronics, steel industry). A shut-down in one strategic point can paralyse the whole production process.

Because of all this the car industry is from a class struggle point of view a potentially interesting area, although to anticipate future struggles a priori would be a very speculative effort. The collective bargaining in Å koda Auto in spring this year, although it finished with a wishy-washy result in the end, created hysteria – capitalists, economic experts and politicians (and, we can bet, the union bosses as well in the privacy of their offices) even tangibly feared the possibility that the workers' tempest could spread to other companies which had established production in the last few years. The combination of a labour shortage and relatively high profits of companies together with the workers' recognition of their own key place in the framework of the general production process generates a rather delicate situation for capital... But this panic didn't come from nowhere – even just a few hours long union-controlled strike in Å koda Auto in March/April 2005 caused them to sit up and listen, even if the media didn't promote it so much.

Why the outbreak of open struggles in this sector did not happen is an issue for an ongoing inquiry . We must take into account the fact that workers (not only) in the car sector are confronted with totally new methods of organisation of work and production and that the change in the technical composition of the working class is still de facto under way (which, however, does not mean that there are no micro-conflicts in workplaces.(4)) There is also information missing about where the most important conflict points in this new production are, from which possible struggle could develop. This is of course inseparably bound up with our very insufficient awareness about how concretely the technical composition changes. Who exactly works in these factories: with what qualifications, of what age, from where, with what experiences, with what subjective perspectives and ambitions? How, concretely, do they react to the new organisation of work and new technologies, what is concretely their relation to the unions?

Similar questions are relevant but firstly it was necessary to make the first step, which is summed up by the texts in Czech and Slovak. They are now and then unfortunately a little bit dry and circumstantial (numbers are here a “necessary evil”) but it was the only way get at least a rough picture of the basic balance of class forces. Another level of survey for the struggle, contacts with workers, is necessary not only for detecting the course of events under the surface in the factories but also for approaching more radical workers from particular places, and in the longer term to interconnect them, creating a network which will not satisfy the hot-blooded desire for “something to happen right now” but which will not leave the fragmented islands adrift in isolation and resignation and which will create a space for a practical, concrete critique of capital and for generalisation and political unification of minorities. It is something which is actually a central point of the struggle survey but which is missing more concrete contours: bigger struggles in the car industry as one of the key sectors of the accumulation of capital in Central Europe are, after all, still not something real but just a future possibility.

The “Situational review” itself is divided into sections on the Czech Republic and Slovakia but it is necessary to understand that this division is just instrumental. The car industry in these countries definitely does not form a closed circle - its production cycle rather runs across (not only) the Czech-Slovak borders, and there is an important cohesion caused by work force migration (until now especially in the direction from Slovakia and Poland to the Czech Republic). Last but not least, we believe that on the basis of these aspects of mutual cohesion an international context of class struggle will also be created in the future.

KPK, June 2007

Notes:

- (1) Methods of action of the class subject referred to as the “mass worker” thus obtained a certain hegemony and they had a practical significance also for other workers during the 60’s in Italy, both thanks to practical example and to the “spreading” of fordism and taylorism into other parts of the social production process, including the sectors outside of the mass production of consumer goods. However, this in no way means that other parts of the working class were subordinated to the “mass worker” or that the “mass worker” had to necessarily stay at the head of them, as was claimed by some operaists later (for instance the Potere Operaio group). See the interview with Steve Wright, Wildcat 70, Sommer 2004, s. 9-12. [http://www.wildcat-www.de/wildcat/70/w70_steve.htm]
- (2) As an example of the weakness of an otherwise very interesting movement in Argentina after the state crash in 2001, we can mention the fact that workers from such important sectors as oil or the car industry didn’t join unemployed people and the proletarianised “middle class”.
- (3) It is certain that it is precisely the absence of larger class conflicts (secured by restructuring processes, especially in the second half of the 90’s) and the related “political stability” that represents one of the main reasons why “foreign investors” came to the Czech Republic: “[...] the delegation of Japanese entrepreneurs came here. They came to examine the market, to see if it pays for them to invest here. I expected that they would ask about conditions in the factory. No, the first question was: What is the position of the trade unions, how many strikes do we have, if there is social tension or if we have social peace.” (Interview with Igor Tomeš, advisor to the World Bank for social policy, Ekonom 12/2005, 24.3.2005)
- (4) That such small conflicts can also potentially become a basis of bigger “troubles” is proved by the following statement by a functionary of the OS KOVO trade unions (which at the same time illustrates the role of trade unions in class conflicts). Question: “What did you succeed in recently?” Answer: “Above all we managed to ward off a wildcat strike by part of the employees of VDO Brandýs nad Labem, whose reasons were the personal constitution of middle level management and an unclear evaluation of performance for the incentive bonus of the wage in team work.” (Chief of Central Czech

methodology department of OS KOVO trade unions Milan Fiala in an interview for the trade union magazine Kovák No. 42/2005.[http://www.oskovo.cz/kovak/2005/k42_25a.htm#04])