

Unions charge plant served as detention center

Ford complicit in Argentine repression

Bill Vann
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Ford Motor Company's factory in an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires served as a clandestine detention center for workers who "disappeared" under the military dictatorship of the 1970s, according to legal documents submitted by Argentine union representatives in a Madrid court on March 16.

They charged that workers were selected for detention, torture and execution in consultation with Ford management, which provided the military with facilities in Ford's General Pacheco plant and even donated vehicles to transport prisoners to military prisons and torture centers.

The evidence against the American automaker was presented as part of a 5,000-page report detailing the repression suffered by the Argentine working class under the US-backed military junta which seized power in 1976. The document provided names and details concerning 9,000 workers who were among the 30,000 who perished at the hands of the junta during the so-called "dirty war."

The case in Spain was initiated two years ago by relatives of some of the estimated 600 Spanish citizens who disappeared in Argentina during the military repression. The Spanish court has claimed the right to try the Argentine military leaders under international law, citing as precedent the prosecution of fugitive Nazi war criminals.

Ford's Argentine subsidiary was one of several prominent industrial firms named in the report submitted by the Central de Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA), a body which is opposed to the larger trade union confederation linked to the ruling Peronist party of President Carlos Menem. Among the other firms accused of having helped the military round up their own militant workers were the Astilleros de Zona shipyards and the metal firm Ingenio Ledesma.

The number of workers who either disappeared or suffered torture, imprisonment, exile or politically-motivated victimization totaled more than one million during the six years of dictatorship (1976-82), the report stated. Of the 30,000 disappeared, more than two-thirds were workers.

According to the evidence presented by the CTA, much of this repression was directed by Ford and the other major industrial firms. They drew up lists of "subversive" workers and handed them over to the military "task forces" which were allowed to operate within the factories. These groups kidnapped workers, tortured them-at times within the plants themselves-and then murdered them.

The union document described the repression as an attempt by big business to "implement state terrorism and genocide with the objective of socially disciplining the working class and thereby obtaining a higher rate of profit..." Within the first year of the junta's taking power, Argentine wage levels were cut in half, all union contracts were suspended, factory committees were outlawed and tens of thousands of militant workers were fired.

The role of the corporations in this process has long been known in Argentina, but the CTA documents bring together for the first time a great deal of concrete evidence concerning their activities. In the case of Ford, it establishes that the company's Argentine factory was used between 1976 and 1978 as a detention center and that management allowed the military to set up its own bunker inside the plant.

Among the cases cited in the report was that of Juan Carlos Conti, a Ford union delegate from the SMATA mechanics union. Conti was kidnapped on April 14, 1976 and taken to the detention center inside the plant.

"The operation was carried out by a task force

belonging to the Argentine Army, which for some time had been operating inside the plant, made use of the company's installations and was known by everyone," the document states. The report states that the action was carried out while Conti was on the job, and goes on to spell out the complicity of Ford management.

"Conti was taken to a cell inside the company's building. He was taken out of the plant, in the full light of day, in a truck belonging to the company, with his hands tied with wire and with the full knowledge of his supervisors."

Shortly after Conti was abducted and disappeared, Ford management sent a telegram to his home informing him that he had been fired for "abandoning his work." His wife answered the charge, explaining what Ford management already knew about her husband's disappearance, but the company fired him anyway.

Having survived the repression, Conti took Ford to labor court in 1984. Ironically, the case was not brought over Ford's collaboration in his illegal arrest and detention, but rather as a claim for back wages and benefits unjustly denied him. To prove his case, however, the worker was compelled to detail the "forces beyond his control" which prevented him from reporting to work. The proceedings of the labor case, which Conti won, were introduced as part of the report to the Madrid court.

Also submitted was evidence gathered by the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP) concerning the connections between Ford and the dictatorship's repression. This included testimony by Ford worker Adolfo Omar Sanchez, who recounted a meeting between workers' delegates and the plant's directors on March 25, 1976, just one day after the military coup.

At the end of the meeting, Ford's head of labor relations mockingly told the workers, "You'll be giving greetings to a friend of mine, Camps." He was referring to Ramon Camps, the chief of police in the province of Buenos Aires, who was responsible for setting up the clandestine detention and torture centers there. Three days later Sanchez was abducted and taken to a military detention center.

The Spanish court has also uncovered evidence linking secret bank accounts in Switzerland and elsewhere to leading Argentine military figures

implicated in the disappearances of the 1970s. Among those identified is the retired general Antonio Bossi, the governor of the impoverished northern province of Tucuman. Bossi headed military operations there under the dictatorship. Human rights groups have charged that an estimated \$400,000 in a Swiss account he opened during the time of the junta came in large part from money and property looted from the disappeared.

Argentina's President Menem has denounced the Spanish court case in vitriolic terms, describing the trial as a Spanish "judicial ambush" of the Argentine armed forces based on "maneuvers forged by the ultra-left." He has vowed to veto attempts within the Argentine parliament to repeal laws which granted a sweeping amnesty to all those who participated in the repression.

In Argentina, as throughout Latin America, the transition from dictatorship to civilian rule was carried out without any settling of accounts with the former military rulers. Victims of torture and the families of the disappeared have been barred from seeking legal redress, while the military institutions which carried out the mass repression remain intact.



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