

# British Ford workers to ballot on industrial action

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Ford workers at the company's main British plant have voted overwhelmingly for a ballot on taking industrial action. The vote was taken at two mass meetings last Friday morning. Workers at the Dagenham plant, who have been on a company-imposed four-day week since October, voted on a "down day". Four-day working was instituted by Ford due to overcapacity in the European car market. Around 45 percent of the Fiesta and Mazda 121 cars, as well as the vans built at Dagenham, are for export.

The call for industrial action followed two unofficial stoppages last week. On Tuesday, workers in the paint and trim plant walked out; the stoppage was then continued by the night shift. On Thursday, workers in the engine plant followed suit.

The immediate cause for the walkouts was an alleged incident involving a foreman racially abusing an Asian production worker. The stoppages occurred after union stewards reported back to the workforce that management were not going to take any disciplinary action against the foreman, and a meeting between the unions and management failed to redress this. This is only the latest in a series of incidents in which the company has been found culpable of racial discrimination.

An industrial action ballot can take up to a month to organise. In the meantime, Ford's President Jac Nasser is to fly to Britain to meet with Bill Morris, leader of the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), which covers the majority of production line workers at the plant. The company has threatened that further action could result in job losses. Ian McAllister, chairman of Ford of Britain, warned that a £300 million development plan at the plant could be withdrawn. "It would be a tragedy for Dagenham if this issue was to cause upset and a reversal of the way the plant is

perceived by Ford senior management", he said.

In addition to the complaints of racial harassment, workers have highlighted ongoing problems of bullying by foremen on the production line. Underlying this friction is the drive for increased productivity. Ford UK today produces as many cars as it did 20 years ago, but with a workforce that has declined from 76,000 to 26,000. Ford workers are amongst the lowest paid in the industry. Jaguar workers earn between £22 and £28 a week more on basic rates, even though the company is owned by Ford following a take-over.

The TGWU and the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) are currently involved in negotiations with Ford over a new contract. They have been mandated by their members to pursue a pay claim well above inflation and to seek a reduction in the working week to 37 hours. The unions have maintained that speed-ups and an end to industrial action would secure an improvement in pay and conditions. The last deal resulted in an incremental pay increase, after huge increases in productivity: a 4.75 percent increase for the first year, and a fraction above inflation for the year following.

Tony Woodley, the TGWU chief negotiator, admitted that the union had found it difficult to "sell" the deal: "If Ford don't get serious on pay and hours the mood will turn from disappointment into anger, but I'm not trying to talk up a battle." Woodley stated that it was only thanks to union co-operation that Ford UK had transformed itself into "a very efficient and productive part of a global business".

The Dagenham plant is not the only one to be affected by unofficial action. Four weeks ago tool workers at the components plant in Enfield, North London, undertook a 24-hour unofficial strike in a dispute over allowances contained in the previous

contract.

*See Also:*

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[7 October 1999]



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