

Walkout over racism at Ford UK

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Autoworkers employed at Ford's main British production facility staged a walkout to protest against racial harassment on Tuesday. Some 1,200 workers from the paint, trim and assembly sections at the Dagenham plant refused to return to work after the morning tea break. The action was continued by the night shift, halting production of Fiestas and Mazda 121s. It was the first mass walkout at the plant in 10 years.

Situated on the outskirts of east London, Dagenham has a workforce of 9,000. Almost 45 percent are from ethnic minorities. Black, white and Asian workers participated in the unofficial action. Workers wore stickers on their overalls demanding action against a racist manager and the slogan "justice and respect".

The dispute followed management's refusal to discipline a white foreman for allegedly verbally abusing and pushing Jaswir Tega, an Asian worker, dangerously close to a conveyor belt last week. Tega is a shop steward for the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU). Workers walked out after hearing from union stewards that Ford had refused to suspend the foreman in question.

In a perfunctory press release, the company claimed it was unaware of the cause of the dispute and stated that it had a "zero tolerance" policy on racism. But this claim is belied by the company's recent history. In the past four years, Ford has been found guilty of racism on three separate occasions. Only two weeks ago, the company was forced to accept liability for racial abuse in an industrial tribunal brought by an Asian worker at the plant. The tribunal heard how Sukhjit Parma, 34 years old, had suffered a four-year ordeal of physical and verbal abuse.

This included:

- Racist graffiti—Ku Klux Klan was daubed on the toilet wall near to where he worked along with the threat: "The last thing Paki Parma sees going to meet

nigger Lawrence"—a reference to Stephen Lawrence, the black teenager knifed to death by racists in April 1993.

- Physical intimidation—food was knocked out of Parma's hand because it was Indian.

- Health and safety jeopardised—Parma was forced to work in a spray cell booth without the necessary protective equipment, until he became violently sick. This was dubbed the "punishment cell".

The main protagonists in Parma's victimisation were his foreman and a line manager who threatened Parma that they would break his legs if he complained. The two also attempted to have Parma sacked on bogus charges. Senior management were aware of this intimidation from as far back as mid-1996 but no action was taken until February 1998, when an internal inquiry was set up. After hearing evidence from as many as 50 witnesses, a tribunal into racist abuse and harassment was established. Even so, 10 months elapsed before this hearing, leaving Parma to continue working in a hostile environment. Parma has been off work sick since August and requires police protection. The foreman was subsequently demoted and the supervisor sacked, but the tribunal has been adjourned until February while the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) and management discuss the terms of the settlement.

Three years ago, the company was forced to pay compensation to four black workers after white faces were superimposed over theirs in a picture in a sales brochure. In 1997, more than £70,000 in compensation was awarded to seven Asian and Afro-Caribbean workers at Dagenham after it was found that they had been discriminated against when applying for jobs in the truck fleet. Pay in this area is almost double that on the production line, and just 2 percent of the workforce

in this sector are from ethnic minorities.

A shop steward for the AEEU refused to take up Parma's case when it was first brought to his attention. Following the walkout, AEEU leader Sir Ken Jackson said complacently that "race relations have improved at Ford over the recent years but there are still clear examples of outrageous abuse which Ford has signally failed to deal with."

Bill Morris, TGWU general secretary and Britain's only black trade union leader, simply reiterated his call for talks over racism in the company with Ford's world President Jac Nasser. Another union source warned, "Unless people outside the plant get a grip on the situation and put structures in place that staff have confidence in, there'll be more of these wildcat walkouts." The unions have now asked the Commission for Racial Equality to launch a formal investigation into incidents at the factory.

But the walkout indicates that workers have become increasingly frustrated over the unions' collaboration with management on several fronts. There have been a number of small, partial stoppages over the last week. Workers report a general increase in bullying and assaults by foreman as the productivity drives, agreed between Ford and the unions, are implemented. There are also long-standing grievances over hours and pay. This discontent is becoming more focussed as the union and management enter into their biannual negotiations on pay and conditions.



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