

ANATOMY OF AN INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLE



INTRODUCTION

This article by Garry Hill, a worker at the Tonsley Park Chrysler plant near Adelaide in Australia, describes a series of struggles in which he was actively involved.

The text tells of the conflict inside the factory, the rough and tumble of mass meetings, workers' resistance to production, the tactics of management and the role of the trade union - in this case the notorious Vehicle Builders' Union. It documents the union's collusion with the bosses

and its links with South Australia's Labour government. It is interesting how in describing a single struggle the author has laid bare the whole rotten system of capitalism.

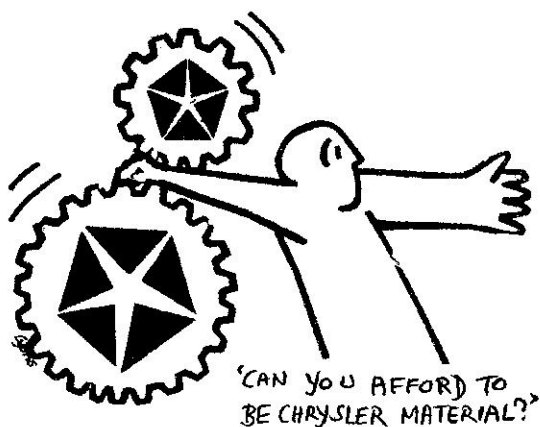
The experience described will be familiar to car workers elsewhere. It closely parallels events at vehicle plants throughout the world: Fiat in Italy, G.M. at Lordstown in the US, Ford at Valencia in Spain and Dagenham in Britain, Cowley, to mention only a few. It illustrates how the rise of multinationals is having the effect of integrating workers' struggles internationally and how, in spite of all problems, the fight on the factory floor goes on, day in day out.

The fact that the firm involved is Chrysler is no coincidence. This ailing company which, for years, has tried to solve its problems at the expense of its workers (see for example Solidarity Motor Bulletin No. 2 for struggles at the US plants at Jefferson and Mark Avenues in Detroit, and Bulletin No. 4 which deals with the conflict at the Chrysler Dodge Truck plant), finally had to sell off its European operations to Peugeot (see Solidarity Motor Bulletin No. 8 which deals with the Peugeot takeover). All this was to no avail. Chrysler is now negotiating with the US Federal Government for massive state aid. All this provides the background for the Tonsley Park events.

An important aspect of the account is its frank description and discussion of the problems facing rank-and-file organisation. There is an enormous of sloppy thinking in this area. The term 'rank and file', with its military origins, speaks volumes for the attitude of the traditional left to the working class. It can be used to describe a whole range of quite different animals. It can mean a genuine grass roots mass movement. Or it can mean a small ginger group of militants. Or simply the front organisation of a political group. When such groups delude themselves that they 'objectively' represent the real interests of workers these 'radical elites' can come to behave in a fundamentally similar way to the trade union bureaucracies they claim to detest. As a result, over and over again when the chips are down, one has seen the isolation of these 'radical bureaucracies' from the workers they claim to represent, the weakening of job organisation and massive disillusionment.

The text finally stresses the enormous gulf which separates the traditional left from revolutionary libertarian socialists. The former tend to see the working class as a hybrid milch cow and trojan horse, and to see direct workers' domination of their own struggles as a tactic, to be advocated while in opposition but to be conveniently forgotten once they are in the saddle. They all see themselves as a sort of government (or trade union apparatus) in exile.

As our statement 'AS WE SEE IT' puts it : Meaningful action, for us, is whatever increases the confidence, the autonomy, the initiative, the participation, the solidarity, the equalitarian tendencies and the self-activity of the masses and whatever assists in their demystification. Sterile and harmful action is whatever reinforces the passivity of the masses, their apathy, their cynicism, their differentiation through hierarchy, their alienation, their reliance on others to do things for them and the degree to which they can therefore be manipulated by others - even by those allegedly acting on their behalf.



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1. THE CITY

Adelaide, with a population of over 700,000, is the capital of South Australia and the fourth largest city in the country. It is also the biggest port and manufacturing centre between Perth and Melbourne. Its greatest single industry is the manufacture of cars. This employs about 13,000 people.

The suburbs of Salisbury and Elizabeth are almost entirely based on the car industry. In the whole Adelaide metropolitan area there are two Chrysler plants and a General Motors Holder (GMH) plant, as well as smaller factories specialising in parts, research, or storage. Adelaide enjoys a high living standard, with a considerable proportion of home owners and a reputation as Australia's cultural centre and a beautiful capital city.

Since his election in 1970 the Labour State Premier Don Dunstan has set out to make South Australia a social democratic welfare state on the Swedish model. He has so far been fairly successful in this task.

2. THE INDUSTRY

The Australian car industry started in the late 1940's with American backing. Up to the late 1960's it expanded enormously aided by increasing affluence and an outlook which saw cars more and more as necessities. However, the only indigenous developments in car design were peripheral - new body styles, radios, gimmicky paint jobs and accessories. Improvements in chassis design, motors, rust protection, etc., came from Europe, Japan and the USA.

Without strong protective tariffs, foreign competition began to shrink the Australian share of the market. Between 1971 and 1973 the world economic recession hit Australia and the car industry suffered. The car companies tried to combat this with cut-backs in labour and speed-ups of the lines. They appealed to the government to cut the massive 27½% sales tax, and sought to introduce 'increased labour efficiency programmes'. These were designed to get maximum production from the workers while reducing their opportunities to discuss shop floor problems. The usual methods included staggered and shortened tea- and lunch-breaks, more supervision, treating discontented workers as mentally disturbed, rotating jobs so that people did not know their workmates, and giving workers so much to do that they had no time to talk.

All this led to the long and vicious strike in 1973 at GMH's Broadmeadows factory in Melbourne, where the struggle reached such a pitch that lines of mounted police battled strikers armed with bricks. A compromise solution eventually prevented further escalation of the conflict.

3. THE FACTORY

Chrysler's, Tonsley Park, was established in the early 1960's. The workforce numbers about 3000. There is a high turnover rate, partly because of the company's policy of hiring and firing according to economic fluctuations. About 14% of the labour force are women, and between a

half and a third are migrants, mainly from Britain, Holland, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. Work conditions vary from department to department: some are good, others like a Siberian labour camp. This inequality of conditions, harassment by foremen, noise and the speed of work were consistent causes of conflict.

4. THE UNION

With the exception of staff and some tradesmen, car workers are members of the Vehicle Builders' Union. Formed more than a hundred years ago, it is one of Australia's best-established and most powerful unions. Its bureaucracy is dominated by the Australian Labour Party (ALP), but is also a target for the Communist Party and the various left groups. The current leadership has a reputation for being 'militantly left-wing'. This means that at times it talks of nationalising the industry, calls the companies 'bloodsuckers', and occasionally calls a strike or a meeting to discuss a stoppage. It also indulges in such radical-tinged activities as changing 'chairman' to 'chairperson', ensuring that a token woman is occasionally elected to a union position, giving small donations to various left-wing causes, passing resolutions condemning the secret use of Australian officers in Northern Ireland, etc.

This is a mere veneer. The real aims of the VBU leadership are: (1) to preserve the bureaucrats' privileged positions; (2) to uphold the current system of unionism on which the bureaucracy is based; (3) to make the union and the ALP more powerful forces in existing society than they already are.

That people should control their own lives, that workers should run factories without bosses or bureaucracy, that work hours, production and distribution could be arranged to ensure a libertarian society - such ideas are scorned by the ALP and the union bureaucracy. And no wonder. If this type of society were ever achieved they would be as superfluous as any capitalist.

The leadership of the VBU is deeply involved in state politics. The South Australian State Union Secretary, Dominic Foreman, is well known for his political ambitions, while his predecessor, J. Abbot is now in the State Parliament. Len Hatch, the current S. A. Industrial Officer, is also awaiting his entry into parliamentary politics.

5. THE POLITICAL PARTIES

With the exception of a few trotskyst sects, all of Australia's left groups had branches in Adelaide at the time of the Chrysler dispute. The events proved an acid test for the left on several basic questions facing socialists:

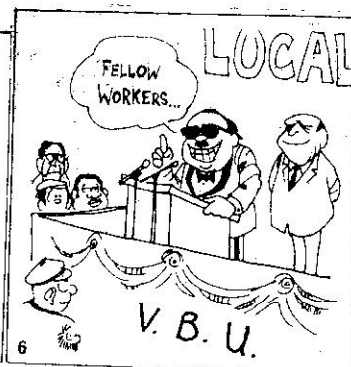
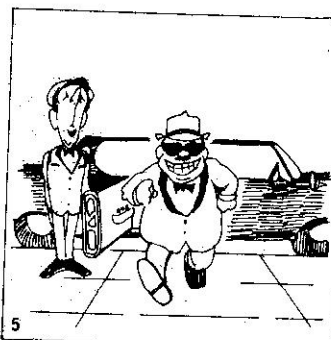
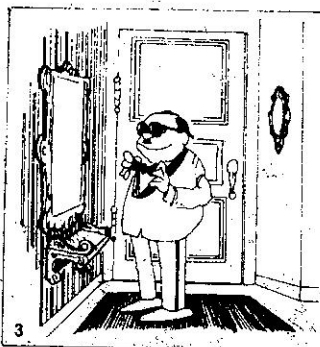
- 1) Should workers use violence in strikes?
- 2) Who should decide union policy: the workers or the officials?
- 3) What is 'ultra-leftism'?
- 4) Should an isolated group of militant workers pursue a revolutionary course of action when there is no chance of victory? Or should they always keep in mind the level of the activities acceptable to the mass of workers?
- 5) What should be the relationship between organised (but external) political groups and factories where the workforce is involved in a struggle?

All these problems were posed in the Chrysler dispute. And all the left groups provided their own answers, either explicitly or by their actions. The parties involved were:

a) The Australian Labour Party (ALP)

Formed as a result of the great strikes of 1891, but not properly organised until 1908, the ALP is closely modelled on the British Labour Party. Its political record is, if possible, even worse. The ALP in power has always brought in a few reforms, but usually to the benefit of the capitalist system. Its main function has been to act as the servant of capitalism when the system needed the help of the working class. A look at its record shows that it was returned to office in September 1914, October 1929, October 1941 and December 1972 (when unemployment had risen by 100,000 in fourteen months - it had been less than 20,000 in 1971 - and when the issue of conscription for Vietnam was prominent).

Labour's record between 1972 and 1975 was typical of its politics: aid to right-wing juntas, propping up capitalism at the expense of democratic rights and living standards, disregarding questions of ecology for company profits, strengthening the state apparatus, strike-breaking, and ultimately doing as much as possible to stifle and isolate its own militants. It is perhaps no coincidence that Labour's four electoral victories all occurred at the time of major crises: two wars and two major depressions.



Since the 1975 election debacle the ALP has sunk into an introspective trough. The majority of its members have become disgruntled and inactive. Its power base is an uneasy alliance between trade unionists, unemployed workers, middle class trendies and members of various left groups, holding dual membership.

b) The Communist Party of Australia (CPA)

The present CPA is the survivor of the 1971 split when the Moscow hard-liners left. It is not so much a party as a collection of leftist factions. It tends to jump from one left bandwagon to another, rather than resolve internal differences. Recent attempts to produce a cohesive theory found the CPA taking up a militant social-democratic stance and aligning itself with the Euro-communist movement.

c) The Socialist Party of Australia

This group is a product of the 1971 split in the CPA. It was formed because the CPA no longer unquestioningly followed Moscow's directives. Although small (about 350 members) the SPA is quite powerful, being backed by Russian funds. (1) It controls nearly all the maritime unions.

d) The Maoist groups

The Maoist tendencies have had increasing success in Australia - mainly in Melbourne and Adelaide. Support is however not so much for the hardcore 'official' maoist Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) - the CPAML - as for a horde of front groups which push the line of 'Independence for Australia from foreign domination - USSR stay out, USA get out'. Principal among these is the 'Worker Student Alliance for Australian Independence' (WSA). The Chrysler Rank and File group was often wrongly accused of being a front for the WSA.

e) The Socialist Workers Party (SWP)

This group should not be confused with the British SWP. It is Australia's 'orthodox' trotskyist party. Even smaller than the SPA, it has little effect on Australian politics, though its members are almost always working their guts out to achieve something or other.

f) The Socialist Labour League (SLL)

The Healyite tendency is quite active and has made some progress in its aim of building a working class vanguard party. But members tend to become disillusioned very quickly, and its activities have alienated 9 out of 10 of those who come into contact with it. The Australian SLL is extremely doctrinaire, opportunist and authoritarian, even by Marxist-Leninist standards.

g) The International Socialists (IS)

IS only started recently in Australia and is the smallest of the left groups described here. Its members could best be described as militant marxist-leninists looking for a trade union base on which to build a party. On the surface they tend to be more open-minded and less doctrinaire than other leftists. Libertarians in other areas have told us that, underneath, the IS is the same as the rest - a view I've come to accept. Nevertheless the IS did act well in the Chrysler dispute.

h) The Libertarian Socialist Federation (LSF)

This was only formed in 1976, after a split in the Federation of Australian Anarchists. It is a small but growing tendency. Differing ideas however have led to a situation where the LSF is a cover name for various loosely connected anarchist groups in the state capitals. At the time of writing the LSF is not functioning as a group.

6. THE RANK AND FILE GROUP (RAF)

The Rank and File Group was formed in late 1973 by VBU members dissatisfied with the union. Among the original founders were at least one hardcore maoist and a Yugoslav anarchist. The bulk of the membership seems to have consisted of factory militants of no political affiliation. By the time I joined (in July 1976) there were only one or two original members around. The early history of the group was hazy or confused by political bias. (2)

I came into contact with the RAF a few weeks after I started work at Chrysler's. There were rumours that the group was a maoist front, so I was cautious about joining. Of the 12 or 15 committed members about half had no political affiliation. Of the rest, 4 or 5 were WSA members. Only one of these could be described as a hardcore maoist, although some of the others were on the way to becoming such.

The only position in the group was that of chairman at meetings. This was rotated, together with the work involved in writing and printing newsletters. Meetings were run with almost complete impartiality. Several times WSA members took my side against other WSA members on various issues. Attempts to make the RAF toe the maoist line were rebuffed as much by WSA members as anyone else. Despite their nationalistic outlook the WSA people realised the importance of involving migrants in campaigns, and our weekly give-away sheet had translations in Greek and Italian. There was also a series of lectures at RAF meetings on the problems facing migrants in the workforce. RAF's other good points were that it encouraged the workers to fight their own battles rather than rely on officials and organisations. It wasn't a vanguard but a creation of the workers.

However, it had its weaknesses. The most obvious was a strong dose of workerism. This took the form of seeing only workers as being oppressed by capitalism; of considering views as being right or wrong according to the class background of those advocating them; of sexism or elitism being OK if practiced by workers. The RAF newsletter was at times simplistic in style. But this was because its writers weren't journalists or academics. They usually got to the core of the problem. We never had any complaints from people that they couldn't understand articles.

Not so obvious was the lack of a long-term perspective. The different viewpoints within the group made a coherent policy impossible. There were three opposing tendencies. The WSA members saw our struggles as Australian workers fighting foreign multinationals. Their solution was an independent Australia where, presumably, independent Australian businessmen would own the car factories - until the eventual triumph of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Against this, I argued for a more internationalist libertarian viewpoint,

(1) This became apparent when a Soviet cheque for the SPA was misdirected to the SLL bookshop in Adelaide.

(2) Throughout this text I deal only with events I have personally witnessed. The sources for other issues are often extremely biased, confused and contradictory. Several individuals in the RAF were much more prominent in the events described. For obvious reasons I haven't named them: they appear as 'an RAFer' or 'a workmate'.

expropriation of the means of production with all decisions to be taken by democratic workers' assemblies. The third tendency was for ignoring future questions and concentrating on day-to-day issues.

This failure to develop a long-term strategy may have been unavoidable. But, in mid-1977, it helped lead to disaster.

7. 1976: THE UNION'S CAMPAIGN

Australian VBU members had a series of claims before arbitration in August 1976. By this time it had become obvious to nearly everyone that our living standards were dropping. The recession had also affected safety and work conditions, and cutbacks were imminent. The mood amongst most of the workforce was militant.

Even before the struggle began, we all knew that the VBU would not fight. What I didn't expect was that they would spearhead the struggle against us. I laughed when other workers told me this would happen, but they were right.

In August 1976, mass meetings were held in car factories all over Australia. Everywhere car workers voted overwhelmingly to reject the company's token offer of a \$2.00 wage rise and a few improvements in conditions. Our demands included wage rises, better safety precautions, shorter hours, job security, a superannuation scheme and various work amenities. The company stated that its offer had to be accepted immediately, without argument. They were tempting us with small bait for a large reward: industrial peace. They were also giving the VBU Executive a weapon to fight with in inter-union battles. Without these 'gains' the union would have looked even weaker than it was, and the militants would have had the support of 90% of the workers.

Speaking at the rowdy Tonsley Park rally, Federal Secretary Len Townsend had sense enough not to present the offers as anything great. Instead, he argued that this was all we were likely to get - the economy was in bad shape and the bosses couldn't give us more. What we should be trying to do was to kick out the rotten Fraser government and bring back the ALP, to 'get the economy going again'. Townsend delivered this last point as if he expected the 2000-strong audience to burst into wild cheers. If so, he was disappointed. About a dozen bureaucrats applauded. Their cheers sounded very hollow in the sullen silence. Nearly everyone I could see was either bored or contemptuous.

Other union officials ranted about the communist menace, troublemakers, migrants who wouldn't learn English and should go back to where they came from, women workers who

were taking jobs from family breadwinners, university students trying to stir up the poor misled workers, bludgers (3) who were leading the country down the drain by not giving a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, and youngsters who didn't know anything. A good deal of the meeting was taken up by these attempts to sidetrack people into seeking scapegoats for their insecurity.

The VBU officials outsmarted themselves in all this, because after listening to this snide baiting the vast majority of those under attack voted against whatever the VBU wanted. Time and again, the officials made this mistake, and RAF motions received much of their support from these alienated sections. We always demonstrated how the VBU tried to keep the workforce divided and ineffective. This gained us much support, which left the union with the middle-aged workerist conservatives, the Uncle Toms among the minority groups, (4) and right-wingers. In car factories all over Australia the mood of the workers was for fighting.

Gradually, however, the VBU began to wear down the militancy by a barrage of pessimistic verbiage combined with a campaign of slander and ridicule against militants. One factory after another gave up the struggle for the claims. Militants in Melbourne factories were told that Adelaide had given up, and that it was only sensible to surrender rather than fight on alone. Two of the Melbourne plants gave up. Then Adelaide factories were told that as Melbourne had given up Adelaide couldn't fight on alone.

These tactics were used effectively until only Fisherman's Bend (Victoria), Ford Cheltenham (South Australia) and Chrysler Tonsley Park were left. Significantly these three factories all had RAF groups. The factories which had no RAF went down first. Fisherman's Bend and Ford Cheltenham, where RAF groups were embryonic, were survived by Tonsley Park where RAF was established and experienced.

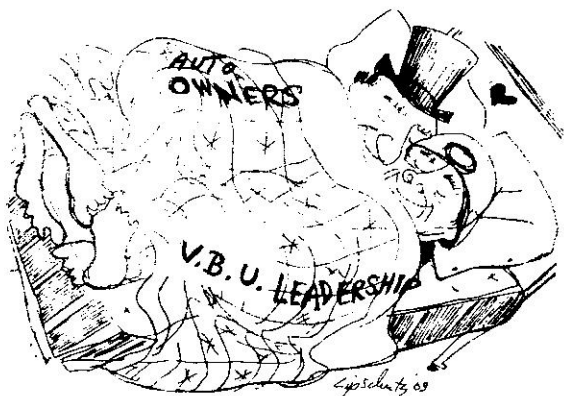
8. RANK AND FILE RESISTANCE

From the first meeting in early August overtime bans and a work-to-rule had been imposed, against the wishes of the VBU Executive. The bans hit the company hard, as it needed overtime to bring out the year's new model. With the union's aid, it tried to get round the bans by bringing in a new afternoon shift. The paint rectification section spontaneously walked off the job in protest, and were told that they would lose their annual leave as a punishment. A secondary strike eventually defeated this threat. In other sections the struggle over the claims took different forms: some sections walked off the job as soon as the daily production quota was reached, others sporadically carried out an RAF-originated 'work without enthusiasm, work-to-rule, obey orders literally' policy. This was only successful in a few departments but showed the extent to which a factory needs a compliant, cooperative workforce. Where the policy was successfully carried out the result was chaos.

Far more effective, however, was the spontaneous sabotage which spread throughout nearly all departments

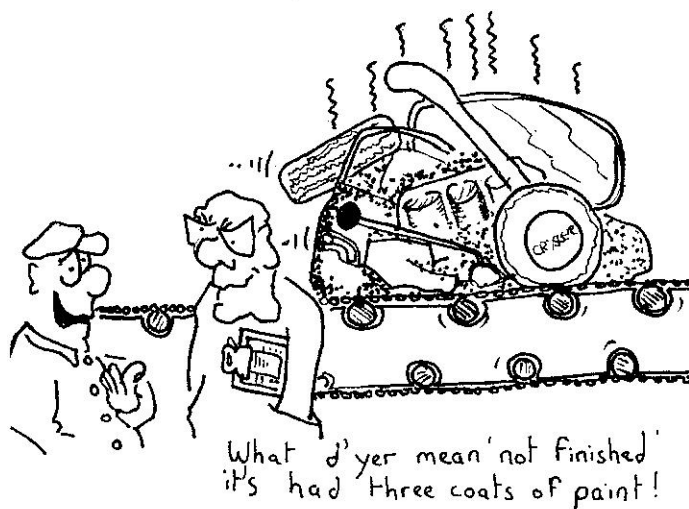
(3) Slang for 'idle scrounger'.

(4) One of whom was a former Lebanese Phalangist who amused himself during lunch-breaks by recounting his murders.



where there was discontent. There were always a few habitual saboteurs who gleefully boasted that not a single car passed them without being 'initiated'. These workers were usually working on parts of the vehicles where sabotage was easily concealed. I was working with finished cars. During times of conflict signs of sabotage could easily be seen - slashed upholstery, stolen car keys, deflated tyres, paint or other liquids smeared over cars. When stricter toilet breaks were introduced cars were smeared with human excrement.

The two methods which drove the bosses into screaming fits were the carving of slogans into finished paintwork, and using wrong-sized rivets in construction. This could only be detected when the cars were being test-driven and fell to pieces. Slogans were often political, aimed at politicians, bureaucrats and bosses. They also included remarks about football or TV shows, one-line elephant jokes, or sexist comments. I suppose I saw two dozen slogans during my 12 months at Chrysler. The most intelligent were 'Sabotage must be stopped', and 'This paint job is perfect. Buy this car'.



Other methods included stealing or mislaying tools and that perennial favourite: stopping the line. This could be done by pressing the emergency button. Chrysler countered this by posting foremen in front of stop buttons. The saboteurs replied by buckling the conveyor belt, and producing mysterious electrical failures. On a normal day there might be as many as twenty stoppages (some, of course, genuine). Some would last as long as two hours. Five or ten minutes was the average, a welcome breather which made this a universally popular method.

RAF's enemies claimed that we were behind the sabotage. This was not so. No RAF bulletin ever encouraged it. We discussed it at one meeting, where it was decided that RAF would neither condemn or support it. I argued that as many saboteurs did not know that they were facing long gaol sentences if caught, it was at least our duty to warn them. Others disagreed, believing that this would sound like discouragement, not only of sabotage but of the struggle in general, and that the company or the VBU would probably let the workers know the penalties. However we spread the word around about possible gaol sentences without sounding too discouraging.

The company brought in four full-time detectives in early 1977. Not one saboteur was ever caught. This reflected the unity and intelligence of the workers, and also the fact that many of the saboteurs were the last people that either the bosses of RAF would have thought to be 'gremlins'. I

remember seeing one worker, who seemed to be the factory's most servile Uncle Tom, talking in his usual fawning way to a bullying foreman while he worked on the back of a car. As soon as the foreman had gone, his expression changed to one of foxy, defiant mischief. His eyes darted around and, when sure that no one was watching, he cut some electrical wires, scratched the paint job below the bumper with a screwdriver, and punctured a tyre. He then lapsed back into servility again. Later I saw him do the same with other cars. When asked about the damage he self-righteously denounced the 'ratbag' car-wreckers'.

So much for the silent majority. The VBU's denunciation of sabotage was as strong as the company's. The factory shop steward, Harry Davies, went as far as to keep an eye open for saboteurs. He denounced 'slackers' to the bosses. (5) The traditional left weren't much better. While the IS tended to see sabotage as part of the struggle, and the SWP as an attempt at militancy gone wrong, they usually described it as 'childish', 'ultra-leftist', 'mindless'. The strangest criticisms came from the SLL. They referred to 'the complete treachery of the maoist-dominated Rank and File' which encouraged sabotage and other 'student radical dead-end methods'.

The SLL's attitude is not accidental. It stems from their hatred of anything they cannot control. Strikes are ordered, directed, called on, called off, negotiated upon; sabotage isn't. It is also a weapon which can be used against any ruling class, even one based on a marxist party or a trade union bureaucracy.

There is however a lot of truth in the criticism that sabotage is childish, just letting off steam, and likely to hurt the consumer who is often a worker (like the saboteur him/herself). On the other hand sabotage shows contempt for the values of capitalism and is deliberate rejection of the ultimate capitalist status symbol: the car.

9. THE UNION FIGHTS THE OVERTIME BAN

In its efforts to get the overtime bans lifted the VBU tried a series of tricks. First was a silly slander campaign against RAF. It was claimed that we were connected with the IRA, because one Rank and File member was an Irish migrant. Then it was pointed out that the initials RAF also stood for Red Army Fraction, and that anarchists were in sympathy with both groups. (6) At the same time the right-wing were producing ridiculous fake RAF bulletins. Fortunately these were so obviously fake and condescending that no one took them seriously. A slander sheet was distributed alleging that RAF took its orders from 'Chinese agents'. Various individuals in different factories were named as communists or their dupes. One was labelled 'Mao Tse Tung's right-hand man'.

At the same time the VBU Executive signed and published an extraordinary document which claimed that RAF was not only out to destroy the workforce but was out to get their families as well. All this was a softening up process aimed at changing the minds of the workers so they would lift the bans which were hurting the company and showing up the VBU.

At meeting after meeting the workforce voted against lifting the bans. But at each meeting the militants' majority

(5) The Italian CP recommends its members to do the same.

(6) Oh, yeah?

was being reduced. After appeals from the VBU to think of our unemployed mates who needed a job, the ban on new labour was lifted. The new people were put onto new shifts to overcome the overtime ban. But Chrysler was still in trouble. Sympathetic shop stewards told us of the VBU's and company's latest strategy - a superannuation scheme that would only be introduced when the bans were completely lifted. The meeting to lift the ban would not be held until all fifty shop stewards had talked to the men in their own sections, and talked the militants round. It was hoped that each section would then have a majority in favour of the scheme.

At the same time the media stepped up their 'militant-bashing' campaign. RAF members started really copping it. One RAFer was punched by a foreman for no reason, and a sympathiser was badly bashed by two guards. In my section there were two of us in RAF. The other member was set up by his shop steward on a theft charge - tools were put in his bag and the guards grabbed him at the gate. His workmates were with him and unanimously defended him, explaining the tools as a joke. He was let off with a severe reprimand, although the VBU wanted him prosecuted and gaoled. (7) A few days after this incident, I had my coat, wallet and bank-book stolen, and had to borrow money to get home. When I arrived I found the place broken into, but nothing had been touched except my political papers which were scattered all over the place.

The meeting to lift the bans was scheduled for September 9, 1976 and everyone, including RAF, thought the bans would be lifted.

10. THE MEETING



From the start the meeting was tense and stormy. The VBU bureaucrats were heckled, shoved, threatened, shouted down and pelted with fruit. Speaker after speaker spoke against lifting the bans and rubbished the VBU. Despite chairman Meehan's encouragement only three people spoke for the union.

Natalie Richardson, a member of Fraser's Liberal Party and who is believed to be in with the National Civic Council, (8) called us union bastards and told us to get back to work; the others were a right-wing extremist and a new worker who wanted overtime to make more money. It was stressed how selfish we were being by not letting all the older members get the superannuation benefits. At this an older workers not known as a militant moved to the microphone. State Secretary Foreman moved over to whisper something to him. The worker spoke. 'Dominic Foreman just told me that if I spoke



for keeping the bans I'd be out of a job'. Foreman made a few contradictory statements that sounded like denials if you weren't wise to bureaucrats' word-spinning. Then the riot started.

Tables were overturned. A dozen men tried to get Foreman. The stage was pelted and the militants closed in so that the bureaucrats couldn't escape. Shaking with fright, Meehan called for the vote. Even VBU supporters put their support at only a third of those present, and it was obvious the bans would stay. So Meehan refused to take the vote. RAF tried to organise it, but half of those present had left in disgust, or just milled about. Some tried to storm the stage. Those officials who didn't escape were jostled, spat on and abused by dozens of workers. Only the threat of police involvement saved the officials from the hiding they deserved.

Back at the factory we found the entrance littered with discarded union cards. That night I got home late from the RAF meeting to watch the late-night news about the death of Mao. The second item was about the Tonsley Park riot. Dominic Foreman regretted that because of left-wing terrorism a union meeting couldn't be held at Tonsley Park. As union democracy had been overthrown, the union Executive would have to make the decision on the bans itself. (9) Next day at work about 800 men had decided to throw in their union cards. RAF was divided on this. Without union cards, Chrysler could sack the men and we would probably lose the best militants in the factory. The VBU would win. The RAF Newsletter outlined this danger without upholding trade unionism as such.

(7) The company didn't want a court case, because he was a hard worker, very honest and popular.

(8) A right-wing group which attempts to take over unions and is backed by the CIA.

(9) Statement repeated in Adelaide Advertiser, Sept. 10, 1976 on the front page.

Faced with this, the union preferred a 'secret' ballot. In several sections each union member had to walk through VBU cohorts and fill out the ballot paper in front of a hostile Harry Davies. The company won, and the bans were lifted. (10) Hundreds more votes were cast than there were members eligible to vote. (11)

The union elections held soon afterwards returned Foreman and Co. But they were declared fraudulent by the courts. It was implied that the electoral officer was responsible. The same man had been involved in the secret ballot about the bans.

This marked the end of the struggle over the claims. The promised superannuation scheme (which had been the bait for lifting the bans) vanished into thin air. Sabotage was back to normal levels by October. And RAF was back to fighting day to day issues - foreman harassment, safety and pay questions - putting out propaganda and uncovering new links between the company and the VBU. Dominic Foreman was given the new model car free. And the VBU got several thousand dollars as a 'gift' from Chrysler.

At this time Chrysler built a custom-made car for Malcolm Fraser. Hatred for Fraser was so strong that it could only be got together by assembling constructed pieces on a special night shift. Factory guards were used as a construction crew. There were several enthusiastic attempts at bans and sabotage of this car and its parts but everything was so secret that no one knew where to start. A car falsely rumoured to be Fraser's was sabotaged by about a dozen men. (12)

11. LABOUR DAY IN ADELAIDE

The last incident between the car workers and the VBU occurred during the Labour Day march in Adelaide on October 9. Apart from about 30 car workers and two dozen water-side workers, hardly a person was there who wasn't holding a union position. A few radicals and a lot of officials made up the march. It was typical of the bureaucrats that they could afford decorated trucks, banners and placards, but couldn't get people to man them. The march was led by Don Dunstan, shadow treasurer, Chris Hurford ('Labour must get the free enterprise system working again'), and the guest of honour, Bob Hawke, President of the ALP, leader of the Council of Trade Unions, board member of the Reserve Bank, and one of Australia's leading Zionists.

From the start the WSA contingent was pushed to the rear of the march. They countered this by putting three people carrying their banners at the top of the march. When the politicians tried to block from view a banner another car worker and I were carrying, we marched in front of the three leaders, obscuring their faces from the crowds with 'Demand

the 35-hour week'. Hurford charged in screaming and hitting the other car-worker, while trying to rip up the banner at the same time. I discouraged him by hitting him several times with the flagpole and kicking him in the shins. Hurford found himself stumbling about half wrapped up in a banner. He was so mentally distracted he couldn't get free. And this is the man who claims he can manage Australia's economy.

This was the start of a rumble between WSA members and car workers on one side, and union officials and politicians on the other. The police stood by, laughing, until Dunstan walked over and furiously told them to arrest the troublemakers. They politely asked us to quieten down and keep on marching. This reduced things to a shouting match, with the glaring, dishevelled ALPers in their crumpled suits looking like they wanted to be somewhere else.

Bob Hawke, on the platform, announced that he wouldn't speak, owing to the danger of violence from terrorists. The union and party men then retired to the Trades Hall bar, where Hawke gave a short speech denouncing 'people who think they are part of the workforce but aren't' (13) and who were 'a nest of traitors'. He and Dunstan then stood exchanging praises until even their own followers began to feel nauseated. So ended Labour Day 1976.

An interesting side-effect was that the SWP complained to me that their paper sales among ALP-SPA members and sympathisers had dropped to zero because the Labour Day riot had been credited to 'trotskyists and maoists'. The SWP tends to judge all political activities by the way they affect their paper sales.

(10) In theory for two weeks only, "While negotiations are in progress"; in practice, permanently.

(11) When questioned about this the VBU gave the tame explanation that not all those entitled to vote were employed at Tonsley Park.

(12) Solidarity footnote: This account is reminiscent of events at Ford Dagenham years ago when a car destined for a particularly hated manager went down the line. Workers made all sorts of special modifications, like welding coke bottles into closed internal compartments. All efforts failed, however, as another group of workers, thinking they were doing a clever bit, simply switched the labels on the car - a Granada - for another. So the manager got a perfectly ordinary car, while someone in Britain is driving around in a mobile castanet.

(13) Hawke has never held a working job in his life.



12. MORE CONFLICTS: FEBRUARY 1977

Early in February 1977 two minor issues came up which developed into larger struggles. Doorhanger Mark Gillet was sacked by a foreman, for allegedly swearing at him. Mark refused his sacking and was defended by shop stewards and fellow workers. He was reinstated by the company. The CEDA union, which controls the foremen, staged a walkout which meant that for two days the factory was without foremen.

On the whole the factory ran just as well without foremen, some areas actually increased production and the vast majority of men were more happy to work without supervision. Yet the company said the plant could no longer work without supervision and that unless foremen were back the workforce would be stood down indefinitely.

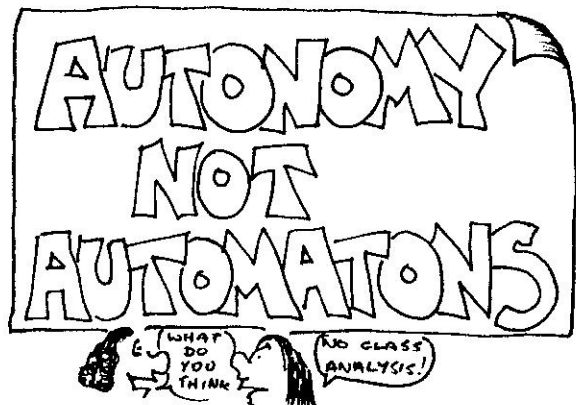
The workers decided to stage an occupation. The VBU had to go along with the militant course. Their sell-outs over the 1976 log of claims had destroyed their credibility with everyone. Somehow they had to appear militant so they supported the militant course.

The company avoided the confrontation by lifting the stand down clause (signed by the same VBU officials without the permission of the union members late in 1976). Work went on without the foremen for two more days. Then the arbitration court suspended both Mark Gillett and Payne on full pay.

Mark Gillett was eventually reinstated, but so was Payne the foreman, who was transferred to another area. During the conflict the VBU ran a slander campaign against Mark, claiming that he was mentally retarded (he speaks very slowly). When he disproved this, they tried another approach - saying that he was homosexual.

The second dispute started when a migrant worker turned to RAF for help with a compensation case because the VBU wasn't doing much. When RAF began to help the VBU stepped in and told him that he should stay away from RAF who were 'just a bunch of university students, communists and trouble-makers'. The worker replied to the effect that 'if RAF are communists then I am too'. From then on the union tried to get him out of the factory. Because of a work injury he requested lighter work but was given a hard job despite work-mates' protests. When he complained he was told there was no place for malingerers on the shop-floor. Despite the seriousness of his injury and his good work record over 14 years, the company and the union agreed that his problem was psychological.

His workmates didn't. A meeting was called by a RAF shop steward and one section of 50 men walked off the job. The VBU told Chrysler that next time it happened they should sack the lot. Despite everything that RAF and his workmates could do, this worker lost his job.



In my own section Harry Davies broke up one strike over safety issues. When we complained to our shop steward that he never did anything he replied, in ominous tones : 'Well, I'll get something done allright'. The next day he insisted a militant worker be sacked for not obeying safety regulations. 'See, I got something done', was his only comment. Soon after he resigned from the union and was given tests by the company to check his foreman potential. He had once been a militant and a supporter of RAF, but had fallen for the bait of trade unionism and had accepted a shop steward position.

13. RAF AND THE UNION ELECTIONS

At this time RAF made a serious mistake. It put candidates up for union elections. We had two shop stewards who were useful in that they could get inside information, but union office was something different. Even though the jobs weren't full time, they were part of the bureaucracy. This was a step backwards towards traditional unionism. At RAF meetings I was usually alone in opposing this move. There was almost no discussion unless I introduced it, and then the replies were half-hearted. I got the strong impression that the idea came from outsiders, from the CPAML. I knew that nearly all the WSA members were in trouble with their organisation for ultra-leftism and anarchist tendencies. (14)

The effects of our contesting elections were noticeable. At the shop floor level it caused at best doubts, but more commonly cynicism, distrust and feelings of being hoodwinked. Typical comments were 'Just out for power like all the rest', and 'After all that, they're no different; they'll be off to Trades Hall soon'. I heard this dozens of times. Only three or four workers outside RAF made comments supporting our candidacy. All the left groups except LSF and the SLL (15) approved the idea of RAF going in for electioneering.

At the same time the WSA began to push their vanguardist and nationalistic aims more strongly. I responded by putting forward libertarian ideas. As a result, from early 1977, RAF meetings were often very heated. In 1976 several of the non-affiliated members and all but one or two WSAers were becoming interested in anarchism, discussing ideas and reading books. Unfortunately WSA was a large, well-established organisation, LSF was tiny and not established, and the CPAML seemed to be conducting a slander campaign against anarchism.

There was a focusing on personalities. I made a disastrous mistake which made me seem naive. I talked to one of my closest friends about the issues at Chrysler as I needed some advice on Adelaide politics (which I knew little about). I later read sections of these conversations in two hostile articles about RAF printed in the Adelaide Advertiser. I had had no reason to distrust this person; we had worked together in the same union against the ALP bureaucracy in 1975 for several months, and I had believed him trustworthy. It became obvious that here was the old story of the good militant without clear ideas becoming part of the union bureaucracy. One RAF shop steward was already heading rapidly in this direction and the others were to go the same way. The failure of RAF to develop its anarchist tendencies into a libertarian

(14) They continually asked for literature and asked me questions on anarchism. One WSA member did become an anarchist.

(15) Because it saw RAF as a menace, not because the SLL opposes union electioneering. It doesn't.



Len Townsend V.B.U. National Secretary
(in dark glasses and leather coat).

Shady Lane (V.B.U. Organiser)
dark glasses and arms folded.

V.B.U. Chairman Robert Walker centre.

socialist approach made this inevitable. I found myself undemocratically dominating meetings, arguing for this course without support and finally without hope of success. Still I remained out of loyalty to the group and to those people who trusted RAF.

Before we were sacked in July 1977 I had decided that alliances between libertarians and any type of vanguardists were a waste of time. Some of the ideas put forward within Chrysler by the WSA made many people feel like vomiting: they defended Stalin, kept silent on China until the Gang of Four were ousted and it was obvious Hua was going to win, and defended Idi Amin as an anti-imperialist and 'historically progressive' Ugandan nationalist. In a way I was glad to be sacked. It meant I would no longer have to work with people with views like this. By the end of the year I had no more contacts with any marxist-leninist groups.

14. THE CLIMAX

From about Easter there were strong rumours of cut-backs, and in late June this became a certainty. The VBU 'prepared' for sackings by increasing union dues (to make up for those who would be sacked). A RAF meeting of 200 men voted unanimously for a 35-hour week with no loss of pay and no sackings. The union suggested to Chrysler that they be sacked, since the meeting wasn't official. Another version stated that the VBU had angrily demanded to know why Chrysler hadn't already sacked these men.

Chrysler gave us a choice, like swallowing cyanide or arsenic. We could have 350 sackings and a four-day week (with four days' wages), or 850 sackings and a five-day week. The VBU ducked this one, letting the workers make the 'choice'.

The only attempts at opposing all sackings came from RAF. Within the group, only two of us wanted an occupation. During the last week, I went round during the breaks, seeing what people thought and who was prepared to fight. The mood was either fatalistic, or one of confused anger. I approached over 70 people. Only three were definitely willing to be in an occupation, a dozen others said 'maybe', or 'if everyone else is in it'. The rest were negative. A factory complex of the size of Chrysler would have needed 500 people to occupy it, at least - we had nowhere that kind of support. The SLL would later call us cowards and traitors, and imply that we were in with the union bureaucrats because we didn't lead an occupation. But like most doctrinaires they had little contact with reality. Occupations need to be carried out by large numbers, and workers don't always act militantly. They must decide themselves what they will do; we can only put forward ideas and suggestions, and fight as individual workers. We can't give orders. The SLL approach was that Chrysler's was a workers' army where, through some accident, the RAF was the general staff. If we gave the right orders the workers would win; if we didn't we were traitors and would be replaced by a better general staff - 'the party of the class', i.e. themselves.

The SLL spread slander sheets at the factory gates, alleging that RAF was in with the VBU (!), that it was a maoist front and out to betray the workers, and that if the workers turned up at SLL meetings they'd learn how to save their jobs. Two of us in RAF turned up, together with one other car worker, who left after five minutes saying as he went that he had come to hear about saving jobs, not about joining the SLL. We left together later, after a lecture on how to be a working class militant given by a university lecturer who used to be an official in the Liberal Party before he discovered how to be a better 'leader'.

The VBU reluctantly called a meeting for Tuesday, July 12, 1977. Sackings were scheduled for the Friday. Right from the start the meeting was stormy. VBU bureaucrat Bill Johns was to have spoken first, but his appearance on stage caused five minutes of uproar. He was pelted with whatever workers had in hand - cans, cigarette packets, clumps of grass. Despite union attempts to block him an RAFer managed to get a motion passed rejecting any sackings and re-imposing the overtime bans. He spoke very eloquently and was wildly applauded. Speaker after speaker supported him, while the bureaucrats had to stand by and take the abuse every speaker hurled at them.

Tension was increasing. First scuffles, then outright fights broke out. The stage was pelted. A bolt meant for Dominic Foreman's head hospitalised a worker standing behind him. When the officials delayed putting the motion several dozen workers tried, and nearly succeeded in overturning the flat-top trailer that was being used as a stage. An RAF steward put the motion which was overwhelmingly supported. It was agreed to form an action committee there at the meeting. But the chairman, Walker, either intentionally or having lost his nerve, mumbled something incomprehensible and then tried to leave. Immediately fifty or more noisy workers surrounded him and forced him back. If Walker didn't officially close the meeting the previous vote would be declared unofficial and the VBU could wreck the struggle as they had the year before. I walked over to the flat-top, grabbed Walker by his throat and tie, and lifted him onto the platform. To loud cheers he was escorted back to the microphone, two workers clutching each arm, about a dozen pushing from behind, and me dragging him by the tie. Unfortunately the VBU had cut the mikes. On our advice Walker officially closed the meeting.

Amongst the cheering workers I could see two horrified faces: the SLLers who had given us the lecture on

how to be militants. After all their blood and thunder stuff they took no part, nor did they support what we had done.

Behind us Walker was groaning about his broken glasses and threatening to sue. The fighting ended with the destruction of some television equipment. Bureaucrats and reporters got together to compare injuries and make up stories. A few people went to the medical centre, and two to hospital.

News of the riot interrupted a Federal cabinet meeting in Canberra. Fraser, in an obvious attempt to calm the situation, promised tax cuts and restrictions on foreign imports. Chrysler stated that talks were under way, and that sackings might not happen if we behaved ourselves. Coupled with this, a hysterical media campaign against RAF, WSA and the car workers was launched, until it seemed we had all gone beserk for no reason. Several times I heard the phrase 'the mad dogs of Tonsley Park'. The Advertiser repeated a VBU description of RAF as 'faceless fanatics, underground anarchists and saboteurs'.⁽¹⁶⁾ The media cleverly failed to distinguish between RAF and WSA, and harped on the 'students in the factory' theme. Actually, there were three ex-university students in RAF, all of whom had been there for two years or more. Two of these had only been at university for a few weeks anyway.

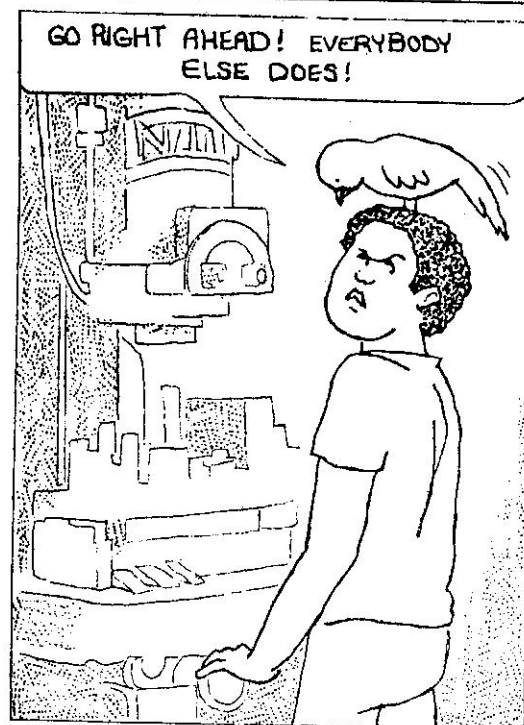
'Anarchist'-bashing was another favourite theme. There had been one anarchist comrade active in Chrysler in early 1977, but he had left in March. Another WSAer turned anarchist left in June, and one person, on the edge of RAF, was sympathetic to anarchism. I was the only conscious anarchist there.

The VBU charged eleven of us with assault. Over a hundred had been involved, but to prosecute everyone would have destroyed the 'student radical' image they were promoting. The charges were muddled and there were frame-ups. Some RAFers not involved in the fighting were charged, and we were charged with assaulting people we didn't touch. And we weren't charged with getting those we did get.

The last two and a half days before the sackings were taken up by a special meeting of those charged, by our regular riotous monthly union meeting, with the production of a special edition of the RAF newsletter, with implementing the bans agreed at the meeting, and with countering the anti-RAF propaganda put out by the media, the VBU, the ALP, the SPA and the SLL. The WSA, the IS and the LSF helped us as much as outside groups could. The CPA adopted a neutral, abstentionist position. The SWP supported the struggle but opposed the violence as alienating and undemocratic, a strange attitude for a group which still supports Lenin's violence against socialists in soviet Russia. In the last few days, sabotage reached incredible proportions, even getting media coverage.

The sackings came on Friday afternoon. One list was based on seniority, the other on militancy.⁽¹⁷⁾ Between 80 and 100 workers gathered at the factory entrance. Cars and trestles were overturned. Parts, tools and equipment were also damaged, and two particularly obnoxious foremen got the treatment.

When we assembled, I tried to put into practice a plan I had thought up. There were enough of us to occupy the staff offices and the cafeteria building. This would cause almost as much havoc as a factory occupation. Food and heating were already supplied. Because of air conditioning there were few windows, and the doors could easily be defended. We would have easy access to company files and equipment, and would be in a strong position to bargain for our jobs. The doors were made of thick glass. Some tried to kick them in, but without success. I suggested we go back and get a trestle to use as a battering ram. As we



walked off, a WSAer said to forget it, we'd form a picket at the entrance and get them that way.

I pointed out that once outside the gate we wouldn't get back in. The bulk of this was missed. All the WSA members began to call for a picket line and went off. The others milled about, confused, then went after them. Too few of us were left to organise an occupation. The reception room, the only unlocked room in the complex, was smashed up. We too, then, joined the picket line.

The WSA claimed that the picket prevented a large shipment going out, which cost Chrysler nearly a million dollars on a lost contract. But we were outside the factory. The solidarity usually shown at Tonsley Park was missing. Apart from those sacked, only members of the WSA and a few unaffiliated radicals joined us. Not one worker took part in the picket. The media had done their job well.

On the following Monday no one was allowed inside the factory without an employment pass. There was a brief RAF rally which meant little. Inside the factory there was chaos everywhere as the workforce was dislocated.

15. THE EPILOGUE

We were taken to court on the assault charges, but the case was dismissed when the prosecutor failed to appear for the second session. There are two possible explanations. Either that, with federal elections approaching, the ALP did not want to be seen jailing workers. Or that the prosecutor had only got his job because he was an ALP party machine hack, and had been known to miss cases before because too drunk to appear in court.

(16) July 13, 1977

(17) It came out in court that the second list was compiled with the help of the VBU, and that some names were there on the VBU's insistence.

Crucial for the media campaign against Chrysler workers was the support of Don Dunstan. Dunstan upheld the VBU bureaucrats as honest men, and obligingly spread the lies already being circulated by the Murdoch media. Because of his intellectual gifts Dunstan has been able to build up a considerable following in Australia who will blindly believe anything he says.

What his followers didn't know was that Dunstan was a close friend of Robert Murdoch. Wherever in Adelaide, Murdoch makes a point of seeing Dunstan. Until the Salisbury affair (see below) the Murdoch media gave Dunstan a very favourable image, unlike that dished out to other Labour leaders.

Dunstan's support for the VBU didn't go unnoticed. His popularity dropped and his image became somewhat tarnished. Many people in Salisbury began to see him as just another politician. In early 1978 he became entangled in the Salisbury affair, a messy case involving political spying, and by the end of 1978 his popularity sagged. In February 1979 he resigned due to ill-health.

In Tonsley Park there were massive cut-backs in 1978. Chrysler then introduced a dozen sackings each pay-day - no awkward headlines that way. There are rumours that the place is closing down, or being taken over by the Japanese. No new RAF has sprung up, as we had hoped might happen.

In retrospect, it would have been almost impossible for RAF to win at Chrysler in 1977. Opposing us were the entire media, both parliamentary political parties, the forces of the state, Chrysler, the union bureaucracy and two trad left groups: the SPA and the SLL. On our side were sections of a divided workforce, and three left groups: WSA, IS and LSF. However, RAF could have got further if the unaffiliated members had seen the importance of a clear political strategy, if WSAers had not mixed their vanguardism with their excellent shop-floor record, and if the libertarians and their sympathisers had had more political experience and acumen. But with all its limitations, RAF stands out as something to be remembered and emulated by workers fed up with reformist trade unionism.

Garry Hill

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