

Unite Ford case study – Maritime Round Table

Background to dispute

In 2007 Unite (then T&G) realised that the Ford motor company was planning an attack on organised labour within the UK Motor industry – specifically ‘...around the distribution of vehicles for both import to and export from the United Kingdom’. It quickly became clear, following contact with several unions throughout Europe, that this was part of a European wide attack on the organisation of labour in the vehicle distribution sector.

‘Following the announcement by Ford Motor Company to initiate competitive contract tendering across its vehicle distribution operation it has become clear that the company are engaged in leading a wider manufacturer level attack on organised labour.’

Organised labour in the UK vehicle distribution industry is backed up by the National Car Council, a rank and file shop stewards combine covering 40 companies and representing over 2,000 drivers. The council is responsible for developing and enforcing a sector minimum standard agreement which all companies are required to sign if they wish to operate in the sector. The minimum standards are complemented at a company level by collective agreements and wider workers’ rights are protected by strong union organisation and collective bargaining arrangements.

‘The company strategy here appears to be to eliminate those groups seen as ‘leading’ car council activity and by doing so to undermine the council itself; fragmenting groups of workers, splitting contracts and placating (albeit temporarily) strategically important groups. This attack on the car council is of course supported by all manufacturers who, like Ford, wish to reduce the cost of vehicle distribution.’

It was clear to Unite very early on that this was a coordinated attack by the employers in the sector and that Ford were being used to spearhead it. It was also clear that the union was going to have to organise and enter into a very serious industrial dispute if these plans were to be defeated.

Research and mapping of operations

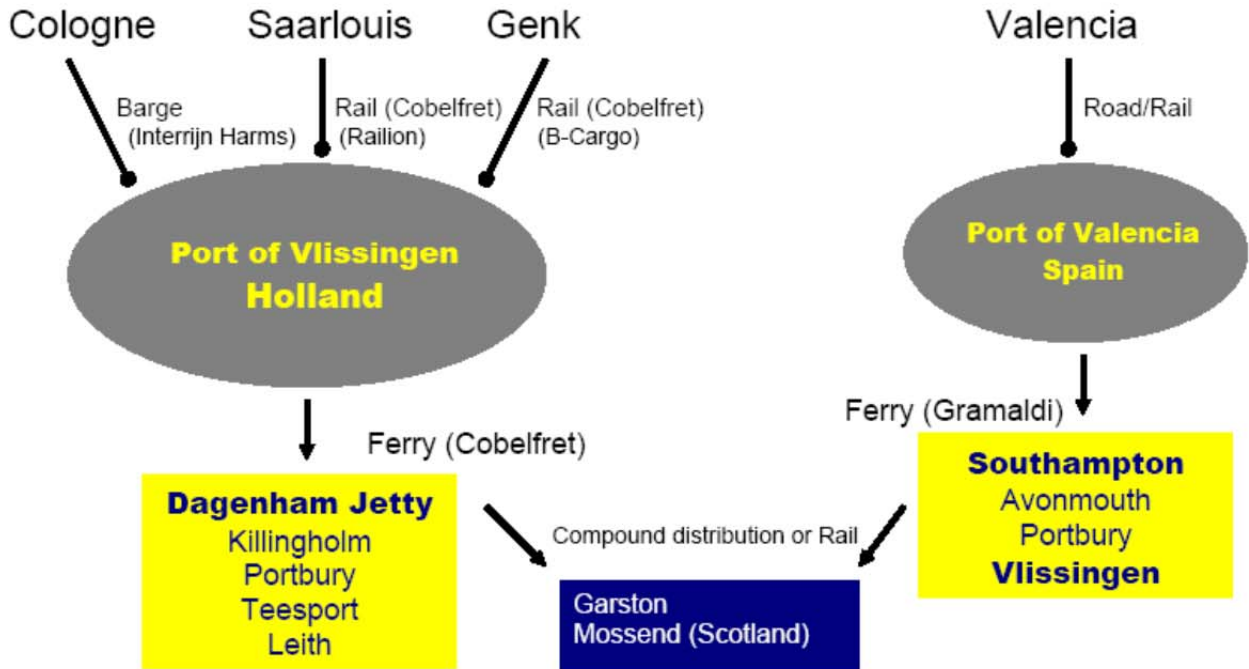
Initial assessment of key areas to consider before taking on the dispute included; the organisation of labour in the sector in the UK and across the rest of Europe, the outcome they were aiming for, the likelihood of winning a ballot of members and successfully executing strike action and other supporting actions across the sector, Unite and the company’s vulnerabilities, strengths and weaknesses.

Once Unite decided to proceed, research concentrated on supply lines of the import/export of Ford vehicles to and from the UK, supply of key components to manufacturing plants in Europe from the UK and the export of Premier Automotive Group (PAG) marques which include; Jaguar, Volvo, Land Rover and Range Rover. *‘We examined opportunities to halt and/or disrupt such movements both in the UK and within Europe and as well as wider opportunities to draw on the support of workers further afield in North and South America and Australia.’*

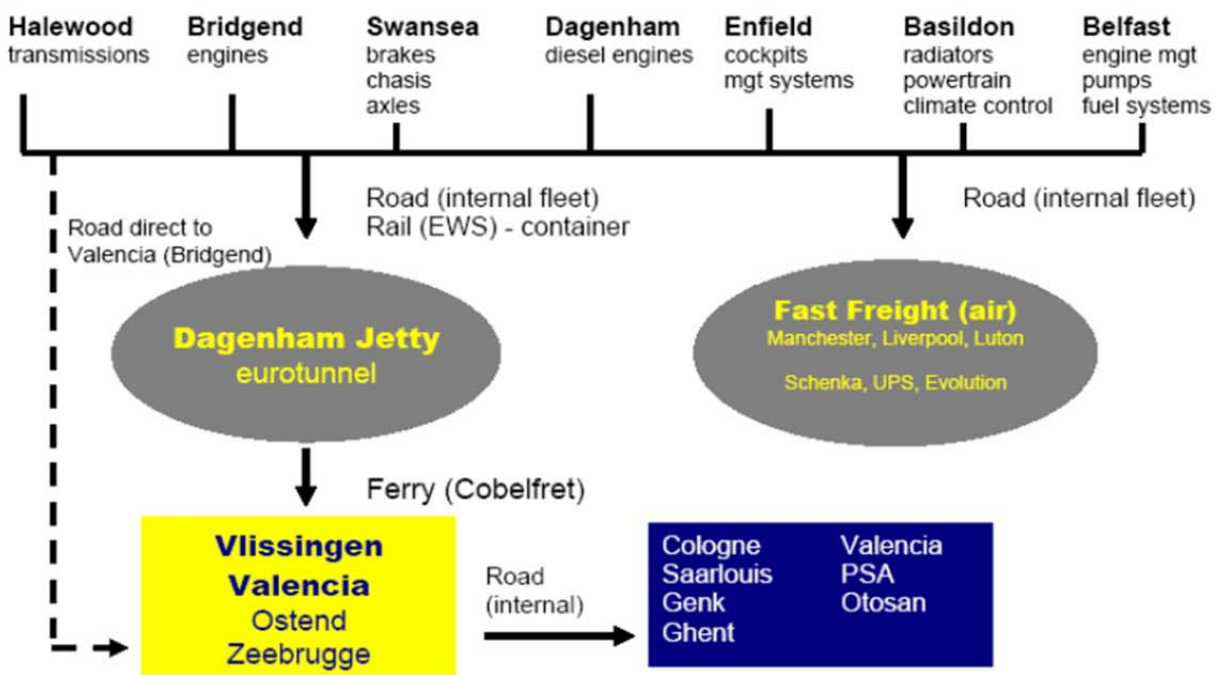
The Ford supply chain involved most transport sectors, including; road and rail to ports and plants, short sea ferries (RoRo car carriers), shore siding by highly skilled Stevedores, inland navigation through the European river and canal network on barges and, to meet ‘Just In Time’ (JIT) demands, with fast freight by air. Unite identified the route that finished vehicles took to reach the UK from European manufacturing plants via transport hubs. From the UK, car component routes were identified going to European manufacturing plants also via transport hubs.

These supply lines are illustrated in the diagrams below:

Ford - european finished vehicle supply (UK in-bound)



Ford - component supply (UK out-bound)



The vulnerabilities of moving vehicles include; railhead, deep water berth, road network integration, high acreage of ground storage, Pre-Delivery Inspection (PDI) facilities and the use of specialised labour, including stevedores. The impact of the above means that there are a limited number of ports that can be used to dock vehicles and that any disruption at a regular port would have a high and immediate impact that couldn't be easily or quickly rectified by Ford.

Choke points identified

Port of Vlissingen (Flushing), Holland is the major port of import and export for Ford within the EU. Finished vehicles and components arrive at the port by; rail, sea and inland waterway from production facilities in Belgium, Germany, Turkey (transit) and the UK. Opportunities to disrupt this operation are many and obvious, they exist on the Railway in and out of the port, on the roads surrounding the compound, at the entrance to the dock by sea with boats crossing the path of targeted traffic and on the inland waterways network from Cologne, preventing barges from entering rivers and canals, locks and tidal basins connecting the Rhine river to Vlissingen.

All short-term disruptions and more long-term actions involving the non-loading of UK bound vehicles were planned and agreed between Unite and the relevant unions representing transport workers in Belgium, Holland, Germany and Spain and involved meetings with contacts / section chairs within the International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) and the European Transport Workers' Federation (ETF).

Disruption to vehicle movement within the UK looked likely to require more planning to achieve. Ford was already looking for alternative access and distribution through ports and intermodal transport use with less organised labour and had made contact with a group of European vehicle distribution companies it had used in an attempt to break a previous dispute. UK laws prevent secondary action and allow companies to take out injunctions against balloted union action for spurious reasons. Unite wanted to be certain they could continue executing an effective dispute regardless of the legal situation in the UK.

Support from further afield for the disruption of exports of PAG marques Land Rover and Volvo was expected to place pressure on Ford in the run up to the dispute. The distribution of components from the UK to European plants also lent itself to disruption, the JIT nature of Ford production means that components and car engines are driven and flown to various plants on a daily basis. Any disruption to this supply would halt production of vehicles in plants around Europe, leading to tens of thousands of workers being laid off and production halting.

Unite were concerned that Ford would exploit scab labour at any opportunity as they had done in a previous dispute. Where it was possible, these areas were identified and contingency plans put in place by Unite, attempting to render the use of scab labour as useless.

Ford discovered the plans by Unite to 'export this dispute' and disrupt production throughout Europe and beyond. They decided to end the contracting of vehicle distribution by bringing all vehicle distribution 'in-house' – a major win for Unite and the workers in this sector.