

Ford Motor charged as accomplice in Argentina's "dirty war"

By Bill Van Auken
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Ford Motor Company has been charged in an Argentine court with playing a direct part in the illegal detention, torture and "disappearances" of its own workers under the dictatorship that ruled the South American country from 1976 to 1983.

The US automaker is accused in both a criminal and a civil lawsuit filed this week of carrying out "management terrorism" under the military regime in order to suppress worker militancy at its Argentine production plants.

The lead plaintiff in the case, Pedro Norberto Troiani, was a union delegate at the automaker's plant in General Pachecho, outside Buenos Aires, in 1976, when the Argentine military seized power in a US-backed coup. He is suing on behalf of more than two dozen of union committee members and other workers who were seized at gunpoint by security forces, many of them as they worked on Ford's assembly lines, others at their homes.

"Some of us were kidnapped by the security forces inside the factory and transferred to a makeshift clandestine detention center set up at a sports area of the factory," Troiani, now 64 years old, recalled. "There, they hooded us and beat us; we suffered mock executions and were tortured," he said, adding that their captors shocked them with an electric probe.

The case, which was initiated three years ago, has gathered documentary evidence as well as testimony establishing that Ford management collaborated intimately with the dictatorship in identifying militants and providing direct assistance in their abduction and torture.

"After evaluating all of the material, we reached the conclusion that the company wanted to get rid of the delegates who were bothering it," explained Tomas Ojea Urquiza, the lawyer in the case.

Witnesses testified that their kidnappers had received detailed files from the company's personnel office and used company identification card photographs to identify them. In a number of cases, the workers were paraded through the plant surrounded by military personnel in a clear attempt to intimidate the rest of the workforce.

Some 5,000 workers were employed at the plant at the time. One of the principal vehicles that they produced was the Ford Falcon, which became infamous as the car of choice for the so-called "task forces" that were used in rounding up perceived opponents of the military, nearly 30,000 of whom "disappeared" under the dictatorship.

Ford, the suit charges, in addition to providing the space for the clandestine detention center, donated vehicles to the military for the express purpose of carrying out the roundup of its own employees.

The court action seeks the arrest of four ex-Ford officials, including the company's ex-director in Argentina, Nicolas Enrique Courad, a Chilean citizen, as well as that of one retired military officer. It also asks that the factory be placed on an official list of clandestine detention and torture centers that operated under the dictatorship.

According to the lawsuit, "The Ford company hatched and executed a precise and concrete plan to violently put an end to union activity, with the objective of creating management terrorism that would permit it to reduce personnel indiscriminately and without major costs, speed up the production lines without any problem...[and] ignore the unsafe working conditions."

Ford's action turned the company into "one more gear in the machinery of state terrorism," said the attorney, Ojea Urquiza.

The case cites as a precedent the conviction in the war crimes trials at Nuremberg of Friedrich Flick, the German steel magnate who reaped profit off the exploitation of some 48,000 slave laborers from the Nazi concentration camps.

In addition to the criminal case, a civil case was filed naming Ford Motor Company, both its world headquarters in the US and its Argentine affiliate, and demanding economic compensation for the surviving workers who were tortured in the automaker's General Pacheco plant.

The action against the Ford workers was by no means unique. Both before and after the March 1976 coup, clandestine death squads and the security forces rounded up militant workers throughout the country, often with the direct collaboration of the right-wing Peronist union leadership. Of the 30,000 "disappeared," more than two-thirds were workers.

The Argentine autoworkers union, SMATA, which represented the Ford workers, had in 1975 called upon the Justice Ministry to intervene in the Mercedes Benz factory in a Buenos Aires suburb to break up the workers commission there, which the union bureaucracy described as a "group of provocateurs allied with the sedition."

Following the coup, 16 militant workers were abducted either from the Mercedes Benz plant or their homes and "disappeared." All but two have never been found and are assumed to have been executed.

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