

Ford executives in Argentina convicted on 1970s torture charges

By Bill Van Auken
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In a verdict that underscored the decisive role played by US multinational corporations in the wave of CIA-backed coups and fascist-military dictatorships that swept Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, two former senior executives of Ford Motor Company's car plant in Argentina were convicted Tuesday of crimes against humanity in connection with the unlawful arrests, torture and imprisonment of 24 autoworkers.

Pedro Muller, Ford's former manufacturing director at the General Pacheco plant located in an industrial suburb of Buenos Aires, was sentenced to 10 years in prison, while Hector Sibilla, a retired military officer who worked as the plant's security chief, was sentenced to 12 years. A third defendant, former general Santiago Riveros, received a 15-year sentence for his role in organizing the repression at the Ford factory.

Tomas Ojea Quintana, a lawyer for the surviving workers, described the verdict as "an impressive achievement." The court's decision, he said, had "completely confirmed that the Ford company acted as an accomplice of the military dictatorship." He added that an attempt would now be made to bring a legal case against the corporation itself. "This trial was against the individuals," he said. "Our next objective is the Ford corporation, that the business be brought to account."

"It is clear that Ford Motor Company had control of the Argentinian subsidiary during the '70s," said Ojea Quintana. "Therefore, there is direct responsibility of Ford Motor Company and that might give us the possibility of bringing the case to the US courts."

Evidence presented in the year-long trial confirmed the accounts given by Ford workers over the course of more than four decades of the savage repression that was unleashed upon them in the immediate aftermath of the March 1976 military coup.

The trial established that Muller and Sibilla—along with the plant's manager and its labor relations director, who died before the case came to court—turned over home addresses and other personal information about targeted workers,

along with copies of their ID photos so that they could be rounded up.

The Ford executives also "allowed a detention center to be set up inside the premises of that factory, in the recreational area, so that the abductees could be interrogated."

"There they were handcuffed, beaten and had their faces covered so they could not see who was interrogating them," the charges against Muller and Sibilla read.

In addition to beatings, workers were subjected to prolonged torture with electric prods and other devices.

Pedro Norberto Troiani, a union delegate at the plant, recalled: "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. There, they hooded us and beat us; we suffered mock executions and were tortured."

Sibilla, the security chief, was present for at least some of these interrogation sessions, providing torturers with questions for their victims.

At the time, the plant employed some 5,000 workers. One of the principal vehicles produced there was the Ford Falcon, which became the infamous car of choice for the so-called "task forces" used in rounding up perceived opponents of the military regime. The plant also provided vehicles for the military to transport its own workers to detention centers.

The workers were the victims not only of the military dictatorship and Ford management, but also their own union, the SMTA, dominated by a right-wing Peronist bureaucracy that worked with the previous government of President Isabel Peron and the security forces to ruthlessly suppress the rebellion that was sweeping Argentina's industrial facilities in the run-up to the military dictatorship. Workers formed independent commissions which drove the bureaucrats out of the factories and linked up their struggles in different plants.

The Peronist bureaucracy's response was one of murderous violence. It played the key role in establishing the so-called Triple A (Argentine Anti-communist Alliance)

death squads that began the murder and “disappearance” of militant workers even before the military had taken power. Veterans of this bloody campaign, such as CGT leader Hugo Moyano, still play key roles in the leadership of today’s union apparatus in Argentina.

The repression at Ford was organized in a deliberate manner to terrorize the workforce into submission. Workers were grabbed off the assembly line, their hands bound in wire, and they were marched off at gunpoint past their co-workers.

The company then sent notices to their homes, after the workers had disappeared into the plant’s clandestine torture center and then into the jails and detention camps of the dictatorship, saying that they had been fired for failing to show up for work.

Surviving workers, their families and friends, along with human rights advocates, filled the courtroom as the verdict was read. Many wore white kerchiefs bearing the words “Trial and punishment, Ford Never Again.”

Among them was Luis Maria de Giusti, who was a union delegate from the plant cafeteria and 19 years old when he was abducted by the security forces to be interrogated, tortured and subsequently imprisoned. He told the Buenos Aires daily *Página 12* that he felt “some anguish” over the proceedings because “many of those responsible and many of our comrades died” before the verdict was rendered. Those in management, he said, “had the possibility of having grandchildren, of taking them to the plaza, of going to the club. We lost half of our comrades, and not because they were old. The torture, being jailed without any reason or motive, without a judge or a lawyer, takes its toll. What did we do to deserve what they did to us? We didn’t so much as throw a rock or even an orange at Ford.”

Ricardo Avalos, another victim of Ford’s detention and torture operation, told the newspaper that he had been kidnapped, tortured and then jailed, leaving behind “a four-year-old daughter and another who was one year and eight months, and my wife, who had to go out and find another job to support them. Without any reason they took me, without any reason they did all of this to us. They looked down on us like animals, and it wasn’t like that. We were simply workers. For that, today they have to pay.”

The bloody repression carried out at Ford was by no means unique. Of the 30,000 Argentines who were murdered or “disappeared” during the dictatorship, some buried in unmarked graves and others tossed alive from helicopters over the ocean, at least two-thirds were workers.

The suppression of the class struggle and the wholesale deregulation of industry yielded fat profits for both capitalists within Argentina and US corporations with investments there. Among the beneficiaries was the

country’s current right-wing multi-millionaire President Mauricio Macri, whose family made its fortune off of privatizations and other measures taken under military rule.

As the original lawsuit that led to the trial put it: “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.”

Throughout Latin America, US-based multinationals collaborated directly with military dictatorships to round up, torture and murder militant workers and suppress the struggles of the working class.

Brazil’s National Truth Commission established that under the two decades of military rule in that country, Volkswagen drew up “dirty lists” of militant workers in their factories for the Department of Social and Political Order (Departamento de Ordem Política e Social, DOPS) to round up. As with the General Pacheco plant in Argentina, part of VW’s factory in São Bernardo do Campo in the State of São Paulo was used as a clandestine detention and torture center.

General Motors, Firestone, Daimler-Benz and a number of other companies were guilty of similar practices that led to the torture, imprisonment and deaths of industrial workers.

While the convictions in Argentina provide a measure of vindication for workers who had fought for four decades to have the crimes committed against them receive at least some punishment, the record of Ford’s role as a direct partner in a regime of kidnappings, torture and political murder constitutes a warning to workers not only in Latin America, but in the United States and internationally. The same corporations that profited off these crimes are prepared to support and collaborate with similar and worse dictatorships and atrocities in every country of the world to defend their profit interests.

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