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Cononavirus pandemic and workers' struggles

Mercedes Benz: peoples' lives are worth more than profits

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On 16 March, the Mercedes Benz factory in Vitoria-Gasteiz made the headlines: the Works Council blocked production in the face of the management's dilettante attitude to the Covid19 crisis. At the time, it was not known how the events had unfolded. Today we have a detailed account of them by Dani Ramos, ESK trade unionist and member of the Works Council.

This example from Mercedes highlights four points. First of all, one of the criminal weaknesses of the state of emergency decreed by the government is that, on the one hand, it imposes total lockdown on the people but on the other, allows companies which are not indispensable (such as ensuring nutrition and medical care or health and cleaning work, etc.) to carry on with normal working where workers are not protected. Secondly, we see the irresponsibility of the health systems (central and regional) for not carrying out systematic tests on the population (as in South Korea) to detect the sources of the crisis and to be able to establish effective barriers against its propagation. Thirdly, the despotism of the company which, in a territory of special risk, such as Vitoria-Gasteiz, wanted to continue as if the epidemic was not going to affect them, when by that date -in France, for example- Renault had already closed its three factories. Fourthly, there is the need to get out of the paralysis-confinement in which the unions are stuck. They are the big absentees in this crisis that affects 99% of the people.

The crisis is serious and there is still possible to make up for lost time. The government and employers are still digging their heels in: they want to tackle the Covid-19 crisis without questioning the fundamental elements of the neoliberal policies promoted so far, and by limiting their alternative to a depletion of health workers and the increasingly harsh application of containment measures in a dynamic of militarization of society. It is up to the social and political left to start putting forward alternatives to this catastrophe by responding to people's concerns and putting pressure on institutions and governments for a radical change in their policies].

After the events of Monday 16 March at the Mercedes factory in Vitoria, which led to the stoppage of production, I am writing this article with a lower heartbeat and a calmer state of mind.

I must begin by explaining that, since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis the feeling of vertigo I have had has been similar to what has happened in society, as a result of the events that have led me, from not giving excessive importance to the issue of the coronavirus, to seeing myself confined to my home in application of the State of Health Alarm established by royal decree of the Spanish State Government on Saturday 14 March, with immediate application from Sunday 15.

Chronology of the crisis at Mercedes Benz

I will now focus on how the events at the Mercedes factory unfolded. From the first days of the COVID-19 alert, the company referred us to the Occupational Risks Committee (ORP). It organized a series of regular meetings (Monday, Wednesday and Friday of each week), to follow up on possible cases, actions to be taken and to collect suggestions from the workforce on the subject. In those first days, the first isolated cases in society were known and "close contacts" (the official name given by the Basque health service, Osakidetza, to people who have had a direct relationship with positive cases of COVID-19) were discovered in the factory. The company has always said it would

follow Osakidetza's instructions to the letter, so in those first cases, it sent the people who had been positive home. Meanwhile, it took other kinds of measures, mainly focused on the issue of hygiene: it provided hand disinfectant dispensers, and we know that it reinforced the cleaning contract to keep common areas, assembly lines, when not in production, and changing rooms clean. And so the days went by. Until March 5th.

For the ESK union section, all the alarms went off on that day. That Thursday the first positive COVID-19 was confirmed in the factory. It was a worker on the morning shift who had not been at work since Tuesday because she was showing symptoms and was waiting for the test result. It so happens that this worker, during that week, was taking one of the famous courses, outside working hours, for professional upgrading, so she was in contact with many more people who also work at Mercedes. Mercedes' response was not to send her colleagues home as a preventive quarantine measure. Nor did it communicate the positive result until the last hour of Friday, March 6, and it was limited to delivering the document of Osakidetza's recommendations (to keep a kind of quarantine, including, taking the temperature, not socializing, not traveling, etc.). The company made those, who belonged to the same working group and those who were doing the course with the affected one, sign. As it was the morning shift, in our opinion, the company was trying to save time since that shift did not start again until Monday at 10 pm. It also told them that if they found themselves without symptoms they should go to work.

From then on, in the week of the 9th to the 13th, there was an incessant dropping out of people all over the factory who were showing symptoms. But, in relation to the positive outbreak, 3 people from the same work area and 2 others who were taking the course were sent home for presenting symptoms. The 2 people in the course (I spoke to them personally on Wednesday 11) are still on leave today with mild symptoms, but it does not look like they will be tested.

On Monday 9th the schools in Vitoria closed. The PRL meeting was brought forward to Tuesday 10th and the company informed us that the alternative of teleworking will be facilitated and that people will have some flexibility to attend to their family situation as long as the factory sector where they work can allow it. Obviously, this notification from the management was not effective and was only public relations, since, in a 3 shift assembly line process, this flexibility is impossible. The COVID-19 follows its unstoppable path and events follow one another in society creating more fear and at the same time more awareness all over the world. Before the restrictions were imposed, the company was already warned that with assembly processes it is impossible to guarantee 1.5 metres between people and that no disinfection is taking place on the tools that workers share. Not to mention the overcrowding of people in specific places and at specific times, changing rooms, rest areas, vending machines, entrances, exits, travelling by bus and sharing cars. Disinfectant substances are used up in the vending machines and the sum of everything that happens in the factory and in society becomes larger, causing a very personalised feeling of health risk. Fear and anger were increasing.

On Friday 13th, the Works Committee demanded the closure of the plant because the safety measures were not guaranteed and, furthermore, there was no single criterion being applied in the sectors regarding these measures. The company did not intend to stop under any circumstances and urged us to open a negotiations to discuss an ERTE. This is an approach without any logic that consists in stopping specific areas and shifts in the factory as parts or people are missing. Although ESK considered that a decision had to be taken now, the day ends up with a decision left pending to be resolved on Monday.

But, the cascade of events accelerated and at the weekend we ended up in a state of emergency. The weekend turns into absolute telephone madness in which the fear and indignation of the people increases. It would be impossible for me to sum up here everything that happened over the weekend and the accuracy of the torrent of facts and emotions that occurred until Monday 16.

On Monday, the PRL department gave a series of instructions to the departments to move them to the assembly

lines. Respect the 1.5 m separation, with waits in places that coincide with the stopped line, if necessary, and deliver masks for work that is done in pairs. The Committee members started to go through the lines and we see that the fear, anger and indignation are palpable. There are even those who blame us for not directing the efforts of the committee to not go to work. We soon see that the intention of the managers themselves is to scrupulously comply with the PRL's slogans, which means continuous stops in production. The work is sporadically accompanied by whistles, pots and pans and spontaneous horns, without any instructions from the workers. At the beginning we have moments of mistrust and tension with some managers, but we soon agreed that the intention is the same. In order not to betray the truth, we have to tell people that they must remain separated when production is stopped, which means not forming "groups". That's how we spent the first hour. At 7:00 a.m. we went to the PRL, where they were handing out masks and we told them that they were not complying with the provisions of the royal decree of the State of Sanitary Alarms, which requires the handing out of masks to the public health service. In addition, we tell them that the 1.5 metre separation distance is not being complied with, that the masks are not suitable to avoid contagion, that they are being delivered without protocol or instructions for use, that the machines are not being disinfected when they are rotated, etc., etc. In short, everything is a real disaster. Later we found out that Mercedes had 4,000 masks and that they gave out 3,200 to the morning shift.

It was clear that the production was not going to be like a normal day but we didn't consider it enough since it also seemed clear that they were not going to send us home. Among the ESK colleagues we started talking about the possibility of having a sit-in at the end of line 10, the last assembly line. For this we contacted the union's advisor and discussed it with the other union sections. As the morning progressed, more union representatives from other unions and company representatives arrived. The PRL office became the epicenter of the situation. A representative of the committee decided to call the Ertzaintza to denounce the safety measures and the failure to deliver the masks to the Public Health Service. The non-compliance with safety regulations is reported to PRL and, as the company representatives arrived, we demanded that they stop as soon as possible and that they bring forward the 10:30 meeting. They all referred up to the director of the Mercedes Gasteiz plant, Titos.

Mr. Titos appeared shortly before 8:00 in the morning and made an appointment for 9 or 9:30. The ESK people decided to go back to the lines to be with the people and keep trying to get production stopped as much as possible. We received the recommendations of the consultancy and decided not to hold the sit-in alone, which we would only do with the extensive participation of the works committee.

At 9 we are informed that the meeting will take place at 9:30. At that time we attended the meeting. The company called asking to delay it by 15 or 30 minutes and that's when it all kicked off.

We started to protest and proposed to go to line 10 to stop production and wait there to be called. Surprisingly, it is easier than we thought and unanimously we went to all the union sections to carry out the sit-in. We stood there and stopped production. What happened from then on had 2 developments and 2 scenarios.

First of all, there is the scenario of line 10 itself. Spontaneously there was applause, cheering and thanks. At 10 o'clock, the time of the mid morning break, it becomes the meeting place of the south hall of final assembly. Hundreds of Mercedes workers join in, as well as those hired on sub contracts

Secondly, there is the meeting with the company, which finally took place. Director Titos did not give in, said that he would not stop the plant for the moment, but that his intention was to stop, but gradually from the afternoon. That the production in the morning shift should continue normally and that in the afternoon shift only the necessary staff will work and stop little by little. The serious thing is that he made the decision because he did not have enough masks for the afternoon shift. We continued to insist that work is stopped immediately and it should be easier for people to go home. He accused us of talking from an emotional standpoint and of sabotage. We met with reproaches, accusations, but we didn't get anywhere. The Ertzaintza arrived, but tells us that they can do nothing but pick up the

complaint (about Mercedes not giving up its masks to the health service). The Ertzaintza refused to requisition the 800 masks that the company still retains. We meet with the company for another meeting at 12:30 and the Committee decided to keep the sit-in going.

At the sit-in, the chairman of the Committee addressed the assembly to inform them of what the company intended and that we did not accept it. We asked people to return to their jobs at the orders of the management and leave the responsibility for what happened to the committee.

At 11:30 we have a technical meeting with those responsible for the sectors on the basis of not resuming production. In that meeting we agreed on the way to collect and send people home without any crowding. Finally, shortly before 1pm, the last workers left the factory.

At 12:30, Titos, disillusioned, threatened to take the necessary measures against the people who carried out the sit-in and decided that after what happened there is nothing to talk about and suspended the meeting.

On the afternoon of Tuesday 17, the Committee agreed to a request for a meeting on Wednesday 18, but the company said it would not be able to meet until Friday 20 at 10:30.

Interestingly, with the staff at home, calls from medical services to groups of workers who may have been exposed to the virus are growing. In addition, on the afternoon of Wednesday 18, the PRL already spoke of 4 confirmed positives and 154 people with symptoms who have not been tested.

Conclusion

The explanation for why at Mercedes we have reached a radical decision is obvious: the famous line 10 is not just any line: it is the line where the finished vehicle leaves, the last one; stopping it, sooner or later, all of them stop and, therefore, all vehicle production is stopped. The sole responsibility lies with the company, which has not shown the slightest empathy with the staff, nor our feelings. It had not understood that working people felt intensely that the company's attitude reflected the notion that producing vans was a priority over people's health.

As far as union work is concerned, at ESK we took the problem very seriously from the beginning, although the process of spreading this awareness to the entire workforce took time in the face of the company's position that it always followed Osakidetza's health recommendations. From ESK we questioned these explanations, especially after the positive one of March 5, but the company dug its heels in. It can be assumed that they were waiting for economic measures to be taken, but events have overtaken them. Our opinion is that Mercedes was looking to continue working at full capacity so that the stoppage would be due to a shortage of supplies and so that the contractors or suppliers would be responsible for the production stoppage or even cause absenteeism due to casualties or quarantines (absenteeism had shot up in recent weeks), which would have led to the stoppage and would have been eligible for some kind of economic benefit. In any case, the health of its workers, its contractors and their families, was obviously not its priority.

Most importantly, the action on the 16th brought relief to the workers on the staff and to the contractors. You could see the fear, the tension, the misunderstanding; and then the joy and the gratitude. In the company's conflict, director Titos said that we spoke from an emotional point of view and, in fact, he was right: of course our motivation was emotional. But how could it not be so: we are talking about people's health, about their lives, a principle that cannot be renounced for a serious trade unionism. Well, on Monday 16 we contributed as never before to put

people's lives at the centre of our trade union action.

20 March 2020

Dani Ramos, member of the Works Council of Mercedes Benz for the ESK union

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