

Linwood 1975: One Year in a Car Factory – Part One

Sent in by Colin Valentine, Rufforth, North Yorkshire

Introduction

Linwood 1975: One Year in a Car Factory focuses on the company at a particularly difficult time in its history. Rootes had been taken over by Chrysler in 1967. One of several undertakings was that Chrysler would not initiate any action to impair either the home or overseas operations or the management and direction of Rootes as a British company in its relations with the Government, labour, its British shareholders, and the public. Despite this assurance, it was clear from the outset that Chrysler had little time for the Imp. And, as will become apparent from reading the article, the workforce had little time for Chrysler!

Some personal recollections of working for Chrysler at that time from Colin Valentine

I found the article, *Linwood 1975: One Year in a Car Factory*, among some papers I was sorting. Coincidentally, I was working for Chrysler at Whitley (Coventry) in 1975 and had spent much of 1974 as a ‘Volunteer’ Electrician at the Stoke plant. The Electricians had gone on strike. The other unions did not support them, and decided that they would accept ‘Management’ Electricians so I stopped doing Policy & Procedure Documentation and some Systems Analysis and became a Management Electrician.

I was assigned a role alongside an Electrician from the Truck Design area. I was very much his ‘Go-fer’. Initially, the staff in the Stoke plant were very wary of us, but after we fixed several machines, some of which had been down since before the strike they mellowed a bit and offered

helpful scraps of info such as, “It stopped when...”

One machine had stopped with all the drills engaged. From memory I think it was a machine developed for doing a series of operations on water pump castings. (Possibly Imp but they could have Hunter or Avenger.) All the machining was done in the same place at Stoke. As the machine did several operations the danger was that it would move to the next position before withdrawing all the drills and breaking them. I recall there being eight drill bits on the one station thus creating a much bigger problem – and some red faces.

Somewhere under the machine was what looked for all the world like a pirate map. Brown and wrinkled with lots of scribbling on it. After spending some time tracing circuits we came to the conclusion that we might have sorted it. We crossed everything and pressed the button...

To a huge sigh of relief the deck withdrew all heads before indexing to the next position. It was also good that we were being watched by almost all the workforce around. So it was a huge success – our credibility went to a new high. One guy watching said that even the Stoke electricians had problems with this machine.

A similar but much bigger problem later occurred on a newish piece of kit which was used for machining of Avenger cylinder blocks. The machine was the size of a house. You used a ladder to get on top and open a series of ‘wardrobes’ which had banks of relays inside. This machine had “just stopped” in the middle of a cycle. The workers had to load bare Avenger castings on a conveyor which then went through about 40 processes to get out the other end a block which was faced top and bottom, drilled and tapped for all kinds of things. Somewhere along the way the block was fitted with the bearing caps and then the block was line-bored. I can’t remember the

Archive photos in this part all show the factory and production of the Imp

Supplied by Richard Sozanski



sequence, but somewhere along the route the block was also bored and honed.

There was a similar machine which machined the cylinder heads and then an assembly line where the block and head met up and with the addition of the crank, cam and sundry other bits.

I did manage to get into the Imp engine assembly area one day...

At intervals Tim Millington had a batch of heads Wills ringed and a bit of work done on the head by Andy Chesman. Chesman also took away the scrap from the foundry including Imp engines where the castings had defects. Some of these were machined out where the casting had not fully covered the liners. He then machined out the waste material and fitted the 998 liners.

I don't know the exact batch size, maybe 50 or 100. Then Tim would ask the assemblers to have a day or two building 998 engines. These then went to Special Tuning where Tim sold them to customers like me. (Actually as an employee I got an engine at a discount price. My recollection was that in the 1970's a 998 Sport engine cost me about £250.)

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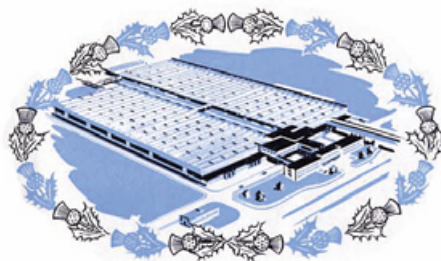
THE NEW HILLMAN IMP DE-LUXE SALOON

LINWOOD—the home of the world's most advanced light car

The new Rootes Group factory at Linwood, Paisley, is a bold and imaginative enterprise on a vast scale. Specially built and equipped for the production of the Hillman Imp, it has brought the motor industry back to Scotland.

From Paisley, in the early days of motoring, came another famous car—the long-vanished and legendary Arrol-Johnston. Now, backed by Rootes knowledge and experience, the Hillman Imp emerges from the Linwood plant, renewing the Paisley tradition for engineering quality and craftsmanship.

For Scotland, Linwood symbolises the vigorous and expanding economy of tomorrow. As the new cars flow from the assembly lines, we salute Scotland's great industrial past. We are proud to participate in its even greater future.



The following article was written by Peter Bain and was published by International Socialism, No. 85, January 1976, pp.4-7.

Linwood 1975: One Year in a Car Factory

Chrysler today joined a growing list of major American companies that have been pushed towards the brink of collapse, by the recession. It has begun an extensive retrenchment that will, according to its chairman, Mr Lynn Townsend, leave the firm 'considerably smaller and leaner.'

The Guardian, 16th January 1975

The above declaration of policy lies at the heart of Chrysler's threat to pull out of Britain.

By far the smallest of the motor industry 'Big Three', Chrysler decided at that time to withdraw from competing in the same league as General Motors and Ford. The regularity with which it was necessary to invest in new models, combined with some disastrous Detroit management decisions about market trends, forced Chrysler to cop out once and for all.

In Europe, Chrysler had belatedly picked up Rootes (in Britain) and Simca (in France) – the remnants left by the other motor giants. Their labour policy was clear. The Spanish plant operated under conditions where strikes were illegal. Simca relied on forcing immigrant labour from Portugal, Spain and Morocco to join the company union. Any immigrant who tried to join a genuine union was threatened with having his labour permit withdrawn, and subsequent deportation to the tender mercies of the right-wing regime in his native country. Naturally, Chrysler decided to concentrate European production in France and Spain.

The last new Chrysler model was the Avenger in 1970, and even that was designed by Rootes. The hoped-for 12.5% share of the British market was never achieved, though a huge deal was



signed with the Shah of Iran to supply CKD (Completely Knocked Down) kits from Britain for assembly. The background against which Townsend announced Detroit's new policy was extremely serious. In Europe, capacity in the industry was 2.5 times actual output. Volkswagen announced a loss of £150 million. Alfa-Romeo's accumulated losses amounted to £130 million, while the French government has just bailed out Citroën at a similar cost.

In Britain, the estimated 1975 market was 1.2 million, while capacity was 2.2 million. British Leyland had shed 10,000 workers, with thousands more to follow. Vauxhall offered voluntary redundancies, and Ford was about to embark on a programme of short-time working (including a company-provoked eight-week strike at Dagenham).

The Lay-offs

Chrysler's UK management had threatened lay-offs in December 1974. At Linwood, most of the workforce were told that they would be laid off for ten days in December. An angry mass meeting unanimously voted to give seven days' strike notice unless the lay-offs were withdrawn and the company gave a clear indication of their plans.

Without consulting the shop stewards, far less re-convening the mass meeting, the Joint Representative Council, consisting of convenors and sub-convenors from all the unions, withdrew the strike notice when the 'down' days were reduced to four.

On Christmas Eve, after most workers were safely out of the plant until after the New Year, the company announced a programme of 20 days' lay-off until the end of February. Under the lay-off agreement, only 16 days' pay are paid (at 65% of the basic rate) for planned short-time. So after the first two months of 1975, most of the workforce were left with only four days' lay-off pay to see them through the rest of the year.

The question of nationalisation was raised by IS members and other militants. The stock answer



from convenors was to express their support for nationalisation, to point out that it was, indeed, the long-agreed policy of the joint shop stewards, but it wasn't on just now.

When Chrysler announced their next cutback, it provoked a stronger response from the Linwood workforce. The company proposed another ten days' lay-off until the end of April, and a reduction in the assembly track speed from 45 to 33 cars an hour from 5th March. (In September 1973, the track speed was 60 cars an hour.)

Again, a mass meeting agreed to the stewards' recommendation that they should refuse to accept Chrysler's cuts unless everyone was put back on 40 hours, or the lay-off agreement was extended. The cuts were universally seen as proof of a run-down at Linwood. Four days before the new schedules were due to be implemented, another JSS meeting was called at which nine JRC members spoke. Eight of them argued that now wasn't the time to go into dispute. The stewards agreed by a two-to-one margin, and the workforce followed suit.

This sign of weakness encouraged the company to put the boot in on conditions, and many sections lost time over the next few weeks in defence of working conditions and practice. However, since the Iran order – for which Linwood supplied body pressings, gearboxes and rear axles – was falling behind, the company requested overtime in some areas. All through the previous period, overtime, incredibly, was being worked. In theory, the JRC was controlling overtime and only allowing that necessary to ensure 40 hours' work for other areas in the factory. In reality, they tried continually to avoid this responsibility, and considerable friction arose between groups on short-time and others working overtime.

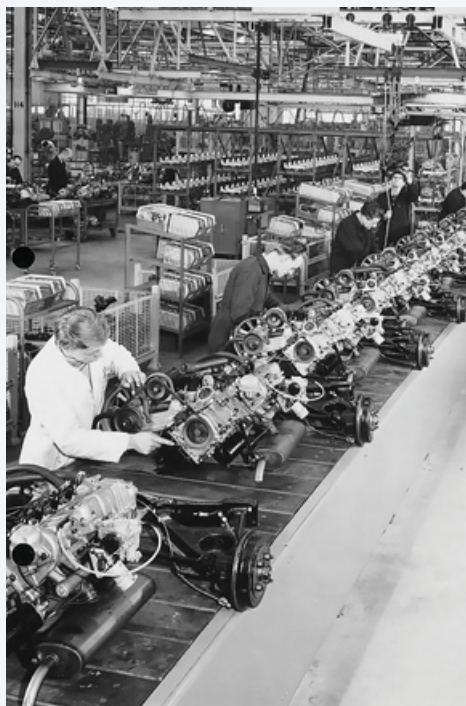
On this occasion, the JSS insisted that the above policy was carried out, and even then it was dependent on Chrysler giving a guarantee of full employment until the summer holidays in mid-July.



The 1975 Wage Claim and 'Participation'

Around the same period, early May, the annual wage claim was submitted. It contained hardy annuals like 'the 35-hour week, more holidays, extra relief time for track-workers' etc. On money, the claim was for a 'substantial' increase plus a cost of living factor. Attempts to put a figure of £15 across-the-board plus 60p for every 1% cost-of-living increase were defeated at the JRC's recommendation, with large minorities voting in favour. The stewards also reiterated their opposition to national bargaining, which the company were expected to raise again.

At the Stoke plant in Coventry, which supplies engines for all Chrysler's UK operations, a claim for £15 had been reduced by pressure from union officials, and with either deep cunning or total



naïvety from the convenors, to a demand for an immediate £8. When the company refused to reply to the claim, the workforce went on strike, and on 15th May most Linwood workers were laid off as a result.

Into the middle of this, the company flung proposals for 'workers' participation' or the 'Employee Participation Programme', as they described it. (Henceforth referred to as EPP).

They proposed the establishment of union-management plant committees with sub-committees in each plant for matters such as quality and quantity manning, costs, training, etc. There would be a national similarly structured, plus a central negotiating committee covering all plants and all unions. If this were accepted 'in principle' by 12th July (so they could celebrate an Orange Walk?) along with compulsory arbitration, then every worker would receive £50. If the scheme were in operation by 24th December, another £50 would be paid out.

An IS factory bulletin at the time described Chrysler's proposals as the 'destruction of independent trade union organisation' and that about sums it up. At the same time the company announced that they had applied for a government loan of £35 million to build a new model in Britain.

After four weeks on the streets, Stoke settled for £8 from 1st July, and Linwood returned to work on 10th June, having lost another 16 working days. Wage negotiations continued with the Linwood stewards resisting company attempts to widen differentials to bring their wage structure into line with Coventry.

Eventually, increases of £9.43-£10.56 (21-23 per cent) for 40 hours day-shift were accepted, going up to £16 more a week for three-shift workers. Part of the increase was a further move towards parity with Coventry, and it was agreed that the stewards would meet on a combine basis to attempt to work out a national wage structure before the 1976 negotiations commenced. The lower paid grades in fact achieved parity, but the largest group, grade 2, consisting of track workers and other

production operators, with a wage of £59.75 for 40 hours day shift, were still about £3 behind.

By August, the EPP still had not been accepted, but after assuring the Linwood stewards that all they had to do was to allow the company to state publicly that the unions were prepared to discuss the proposals, the JRC got the go-ahead to sign. The £50 was then paid, but the eventual combine statement went a good deal further than the Linwood stewards had agreed. It was claimed that Chrysler were desperate to convince the government that labour relations were good so as to help them obtain the loan they had requested.

Right after this venture in 'workers' participation', Chrysler re-introduced us to participation in an exercise we had become used to: applying for unemployment benefit. This time they announced on 1st September that the vehicle assembly would be laid off for seven days in September and another eight in October, starting immediately. The press shop had been applying restrictions for two months, and continued on full-time.

The next day, the shop stewards rejected the company's statement, pointing out that, under the Linwood plant agreement ('the Yellow Book') there had to be four weeks' notice of short-time working, and six weeks in areas where overtime had been worked. The events that followed showed only too clearly the extent to which the workforce had lost confidence in the ability of the shop stewards to defend them.

Because anyone who has received unemployment or sickness benefit up to 13 weeks previously remains in benefit without having to fulfil three waiting days for which no payment is made, most vehicle assembly workers demanded to be laid off as Chrysler had proposed, since they would be out of benefit unless this happened! So another shop stewards' meeting decided by 126-to-109 to ignore the long-standing protection from sudden lay-offs that had been fought for, and to accept immediate lay-offs.

The company, again encouraged by this retreat, tried to increase production in some areas, and even requested that some sections on short-time could work overtime on their working days! They overstepped the mark on this occasion, and after a few disputes, backed off.

Chrysler followed this victory, however, by announcing another eight 'down' days for November, nine in December, and an intention to reopen discussions on EPP! The Linwood stewards agreed that no discussion on EPP should take place until the company gave an assurance that they planned to stay in Britain.

To be continued...

