



Jimmy Airlie: One of the officials at the centre of the controversy

Ford Unpopular, Dundee-style

A fell wind is blowing through Scottish trade-union circles. Already assailed by the effects of the recession and the difficulties of recruitment in the high-technology sector, union councils have been riven since early October by the clash between the AEU's ebullient right-wing Gavin Laird and the other 11 unions on the Ford national negotiating committee.

The cause of the dispute is the single-union agreement reached by Laird and his fellow negotiator, Jimmy Airlie - ex-leader of the Upper Clyde shipworkers' occupation in the early 1970s - with the Ford corporation over the future of the workforce in a new hi-tech plant to be built in Dundee. Employing 450 initially, but with a further 500 jobs dependent on plant performance, the £40m investment in Dundee was promised after 18 months of highly-competitive negotiation between Ford, the Scottish Development Agency (SDA) and Locate in Scotland

(LIS), with strong Scottish Office support. The plant will produce the complete range of micro-chip engine technology for both Ford Europe and the US with up to 50% of production destined for export.

Dundee was chosen instead of rival sites in part because the Scottish package included the AEU's commitment to a single-union agreement coupled to a sizeable basket of financial and material inducements from the government. A further selling-point stressed the 'realistic' attitudes of Dundee workers following the run-down and closure of the Timex and NCR plants.

Ford has threatened to go elsewhere if appropriate labour practices are not forthcoming. Laird uses this argument as a trump card as he declaims that 'the employer is calling the shots', supported by media statements attributed to Ford that Dundee was chosen 'by the flick of a coin' over other

locations. Scotland lost 430,000 manufacturing jobs between 1978 and 1985 due to the recession, and the Scottish TUC's Campbell Christie is on record that 'provision of new jobs is the first priority'.

This places the Scottish TUC in a great dilemma. It recognises that it must complement the work of the SDA and LIS in attracting investment into Scotland, and is prepared to accept single-union agreements in new plants rather than no union representation at all. Consequently, the STUC has welcomed the Ford investment and, despite misgivings, has not publicly criticised the AEU.

Not surprisingly, the Ford negotiating committee is furious with the AEU. The TGWU, ASTMS and TASS have formally complained to the TUC about the agreement, arguing that the plant should fall under the existing negotiating procedure for the 32,500 other Ford workers in the UK. The TGWU is on record as suspecting that the AEU may strive to extend the Dundee agreement to a three-year pay and conditions package for the whole

of Ford (UK), smashing the existing negotiation procedures.

It has also been argued that Ford (UK) sees the Dundee agreement as a precedent which can be extended to the rest of its UK operations.

Moreover, the AEU must confront more than criticisms of its sectionalism. Much attention had focused on Laird's membership of the SDA's board. If the SDA and LIS were conducting negotiations with Ford over 18 months, the question arises: At what stage did Laird become involved in the creation of the successful package, and how did the single-union agreement come to be such an essential component of Ford's strategy?

Wielding the banner of 'new pragmatism', the AEU has stirred up a hornets' nest in the STUC, the TUC and the motor industry, and made few friends in the labour movement as it rides roughshod over established bargaining practices.

Nigel Haworth