

# The Falcon Remembered



During Argentina's Dirty War of the 1970s, the Ford Falcon became the single most recognizable icon of repression.

by Karen Robert

**A**T NOON ON MARCH 4, 2005, A GREEN Ford Falcon pulled up next to a woman in Centenario, a municipality of Neuquén, in southern Argentina. Three men and a woman forced her into the car and then spent the next several hours threatening, torturing and mutilating her. The victim, whose name has been kept secret, was the wife of an employee at the Cerámica Zanon tile factory, one of the flagship worker-controlled enterprises that have sprung up in Argentina since the 2001 crisis. While the Zanon workers have successfully resuscitated the plant, they have also faced growing intimidation, as exemplified by this attack. The victim's abductors released her with the message: "This is for Zanon. Tell them that the union will run with blood.... You're all going to have to move into the factory because we're going to kill all of you."

Such tactics of violence and intimidation carry a pedigree as long as Argentina's history of authoritarianism. Yet the automobile used in this attack has a much more specific association with the terror of the 1970s Dirty War, when the Ford Falcon was the car of choice

used by police, military and paramilitaries alike. Ford's exclusive contracts with the Argentine security forces throughout the dictatorship eventually made the Falcon the single most recognizable icon of repression, one that clearly still resonates today. "Whenever a Falcon drove by or slowed down, we all knew that there would be kidnappings, disappearances, torture or murder," reflects renowned Argentine psychologist and playwright Eduardo "Tato" Pavlovsky in a recent article. "It was the symbolic expression of terror. A death-mobile."

The attack on the Zanon workers also chillingly recalls the violence used nearly thirty years ago against the very workers who were building Falcons for Ford. A lawsuit currently being prepared against Ford Motor Company alleges that the company's relationship with the military junta went beyond that of a privileged supplier.

Pedro Troiani and fourteen other former Ford employees are seeking to bring criminal charges against the company for its role in their disappearance, torture and detention during the first two years of the dictatorship.

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They allege that Ford management conspired with military officials to rid themselves of the factory's union delegates and to intimidate the rest of the workforce into submission. The plaintiffs accuse the company of providing the military with a list of "subversives" and then supplying information from personnel files to facilitate the men's abduction from their homes or from the factory premises, where they also allege that an illegal detention center operated from the first day of the coup.

The Ford case and a parallel lawsuit against Mercedes Benz-owner DaimlerChrysler mark the first attempts in Argentina to charge private corporations for complicity in human rights violations. The latter case concerning the disappearance of Mercedes Benz workers implicates DaimlerChrysler in Germany, the United States and within Argentina. The case names the company's Argentine subsidiary, the military and José Rodríguez, president of SMATA, the autoworkers' union. These cases also break new ground in multinational corporate accountability by naming the parent companies located outside Argentina as also bearing ultimate responsibility for these crimes.

For now, the Ford investigation remains in the hands of lawyer Tomás Ojea Quintana and prosecutor Federico Delgado, who must determine whether sufficient evidence exists to pursue criminal charges against individual Ford managers and executives from the 1970s. Ojea Quintana must then build the larger case against Ford Argentina and Ford Motor Company step by step, moving from the culpability of individuals to the complicity of the corporation itself. To do so, he must prove that the factory in General Pacheco was not taken over by the

military but remained under Ford's managerial control during the dictatorship. He also has to establish that the disappearances of Ford employees resulted from a management directive and not from the excessive zeal of a few overseers. If the Ford case successfully passes these obstacles, Ojea Quintana's Los Angeles-based colleague Paul Hoffmann will use the U.S. Alien Tort Claims Act to challenge the Ford Motor Company in U.S. courts.

SOON AFTER THE RETURN TO democracy at the end of 1983, Argentina set an example within Latin America by pursuing criminal charges against military officers in a series of trials that saw all the junta leaders convicted and briefly

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imprisoned. Pioneering human rights lawyers successfully proved that the human rights violations of the Dirty War had been meticulously planned and directed by the junta, and were not the result of accumulated "excesses" committed by lower officers. However, the so-called "impunity laws" passed by Presidents Raul Alfonsín and Carlos Menem stalled and eventually reversed these landmark achievements. Menem's blanket pardon of 1990 seemed to end all possibilities of justice. Yet the political and economic crisis of 2001 revitalized efforts to reform the judicial system, culminating in the Supreme Court's repeal of the impunity laws in June

2005. According to Ojea Quintana, this new juncture has made it possible to take the legal struggle for human rights into areas of corporate accountability that were previously all but unimaginable.

The connivance between business and military leaders at the time of the coup is a recognized fact in Argentina, though one that has not been proven in a judicial forum. Both parties feared the leftwing Montoneros guerrillas and the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), but their greater worries were reserved for Argentina's organized and combative labor movement. For the military, organized labor represented the most enduring and disturbing legacy of Peronism. Though plagued by corruption and fractured by political polarization in the 1960s, the unions had survived efforts at cooptation and repression since Juan Perón's overthrow in 1955 and represented a major political obstacle to the far-reaching goals of the junta's bloody "Process of National Reconstruction."

Organized labor's strength also had concrete implications for Argentine industry, especially in large-scale establishments where shop-floor delegates challenged management's control over the pace and organization of the labor process. Tensions ran especially high in the automotive sector once the bureaucratic leadership of SMATA, the autoworkers' union, lost control over some factories to a generation of more combative, *clasista* shop-floor delegates. The most dramatic example of that challenge was the *Cordobazo* of 1969, a massive general strike in the city of Córdoba that began as a labor dispute at a plant of Italian automaker Fiat.

In a new study of the dictatorship, historians Marcos Novaro and

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Vicente Palermo describe a virtually seamless collaboration between business and the armed forces in 1976. In one instance they point to a pamphlet prepared jointly by the Army and the Argentine Employers Institute for Development (IDEA), a leading executive forum, which recommended that managers denounce “subversive” or even suspicious employees to the security forces. The response was apparently so enthusiastic that by the end of the dictatorship virtually all the shop-floor delegates had been disappeared from the country’s biggest firms, among them several auto manufacturers, such as Mercedes Benz, Chrysler and Fiat Concord.

The fact that 15 Ford workers survived their disappearance and have lived to challenge Ford in court may, ironically, be a testament to the effective paternalism that the company exercised in its huge plant in General Pacheco, a suburb of Buenos Aires. It has taken years for the plaintiffs against Ford to even conceive of their former employer as criminally responsible for their disappearances. Pedro Troiani, today the most outspoken among the survivors, was an avid Ford racing fan even before he started building Falcons at the new Pacheco plant in 1963, at the age of 21.

“It was a real novelty to work in an auto factory, because it was one of the first ones in the country,” remembers Troiani. “You really felt privileged to get a job there. There was lots of talk about the ‘Ford family,’ and they’d have a big Christmas party every year and raffle off a new Falcon.” Troiani remained a company man even after he was elected as a union delegate in 1970. He dedicated himself to workplace safety and salary-related issues while also remaining so moderate within the

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union that the Marxist ERP guerrilla movement marked him for death in the early 1970s as a stooge of both Ford and SMATA.

Ford invited the army into the factory in 1975, months before the coup. Ford spokesperson Rolando Ceretti told the *New York Times* that this military presence was a response to guerrilla threats and attacks against executives. From the perspective of the shop floor, the factory was like an armed camp; soldiers roamed between the machinery and checked workers’ identification daily against lists of union activists.

Rumors about detentions of union delegates from the premises of the Ford plant began circulating during the dictatorship and were confirmed in 1984 in *Nunca Más*, the official report of Argentina’s National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP). The most damning evidence regarding Ford management’s complicity with the military appeared in the testimonies of several former union delegates who were all present at a meeting with Ford’s labor relations manager, known only as Galarraga. Although two of the witnesses dated this meeting on or after the date of the coup (March 24, 1976), Juan Carlos Amoroso, who was also at the meeting, recalled that it occurred on March 23—the eve of the coup. After announcing that management would no longer rec-

ognize the men as the workers’ delegates, Amoroso remembers that Galarraga taunted them with words that, at the time, meant nothing to him: “Amoroso, give my regards to Camps!” When Amoroso asked whom Camps was, Galarraga replied laughing, “You’ll find out soon enough.” Ramón Camps, then an obscure Army Colonel, would soon become one of Argentina’s most notorious architects of terror in his role as chief of the Buenos Aires provincial police and would be sentenced in 1986 to 25 years in prison for his role in 600 murders.

Galarraga’s was not an empty threat, and the disappearances began immediately. Two union delegates among the cafeteria workers, Luis María Giusti and Jorge Costanzo, were abducted from the cafeteria on March 24 by two armed men wearing civilian clothes; they tied their hands with wire, hooded them and forced them into a green Ford Falcon. The two workers were held for four hours in the sports center inside the plant, where they were beaten and kicked. They were then transported in another Ford Falcon and later a pickup truck to the Tigre police station in the province of Buenos Aires. Along the way they were subjected to a mock execution.

The next day, March 25, Francisco Guillermo Perrotta, a Ford accounting employee who was working as a paid union delegate outside the plant, got a call from Ford management ordering him to present himself at the factory the following day. When he arrived, two men met him in the secure parking lot, called him by name and forced him into a green Ford Falcon. They carried his photograph, which they claimed was obtained from Ford’s human resources office.

Pedro Troiani says his supervisor had advance notice of his abduction on April 13, 1976. Far from warning him when he arrived at work that morning, the supervisor ordered Troiani not to move from his place on the line: "You can't move because they're watching you." When a truckload of soldiers descended on the plant, the factory foreman, Miguel Migliacchio, identified Troiani to them. The plant manager came out of his office to watch as they pulled Troiani off the line and paraded him around the factory, hands behind his head.

Troiani, Carlos Alberto Propato and five others rounded up that day were taken to the same makeshift detention center within the plant's athletic facilities, where they were kept for seven hours. They were then transferred to the Tigre police station, where they encountered co-workers from Ford and union delegates from other firms who had also been kidnapped. "When we arrived Perrotta was already there, delirious because they'd beaten him and worked him over so badly with a cattle prod," recalls Propato. Eleven men were crowded into a ten-foot-square cell for roughly six weeks and subjected to continuing rounds of torture while officials refused to confirm that they were being held there. The men allege that they saw copies of their Ford credentials in the hands of police at the Tigre police station. The workers' lawyer also has the testimony of witnesses who saw the military commander of the detachment stationed in the plant with a list of the men's names on Ford letterhead.

After roughly six weeks as "disappeared," authorities officially recognized the men as detained under National Executive Power (PEN) and were sent to regular prisons. While theoretically less likely to be killed

now, they continued to suffer torture and abuse until their eventual release roughly a year later. Carlos Alberto Propato still does not know why he was later moved from Devoto prison to Sierra Chica, a maximum-security prison reserved for the country's most dangerous criminals. During the five-hour flight he and other prisoners were beaten and told they were going to be thrown into the ocean. Propato remained in solitary confinement for several months at Sierra Chica, where he was constantly beaten and subjected to at least three simulated executions. In May 1977 he was inexplicably released.

Back in General Pacheco, meanwhile, panic ran through the factory as other union delegates abandoned their activism or resigned altogether. "Lots of people left without claiming one cent, because they were scared," observes Propato. Several families of disappeared workers received telegrams from Ford warning that employees absent from work would be fired, even in cases like Troiani's in which management had witnessed the arrest. When Troiani's wife protested by telegram that the Ford managers knew exactly why her husband was absent from work, the message was returned to her.

**THE SURVIVORS FROM FORD GRADUALLY** recovered their freedom throughout the months of 1977, but they lived in terror for the remainder of the military years, unable to return to their old jobs and blacklisted from other factories. Having briefly counted themselves among the most privileged and organized industrial workers of Argentina, they now found themselves living as ghosts. Perhaps they survived to spread word of their ordeal because they were deemed less dangerous or more

"redeemable" than the Mercedes or Fiat workers who had fatally challenged not only their employers but also their own union leadership. SMATA president José Rodríguez, whose control of the union has continued unbroken since 1973, is himself implicated in the Mercedes Benz disappearances. In fact, Propato and Troiani recall a meeting from before the coup when Rodríguez warned them that they should calm union activism at the Ford plant because the military would soon be taking power.

Ironically, as corporate entities both SMATA and Ford Motor Company have enjoyed an institutional continuity that stands in dramatic contrast to the upheavals that have broken down and remade the Argentine state several times since 1976. They have remained as durable as the old Ford Falcons themselves that still roam the streets and are occasionally brought out for intimidation operations. That same continuity may yet be used against Ford in court, however, just as it has been used against firms that profited from slave labor in Nazi Germany (including Ford Motor Company and its subsidiary Ford Werke).

Memory is also a form of endurance, and memories of Ford's association with the dictatorship remain vivid in Argentina. Artists continue to evoke the Falcon in sculpture, film and photography as the physical embodiment of terror, and at least one Falcon-owner in Buenos Aires feels compelled to drive with a sticker in the back window that reads, "My Falcon was not to blame. *Nunca más*" (Never again). The plaintiffs seek to bring their own memories to light through their case against Ford. In the words of survivor Carlos Alberto Propato, "We are part of the Falcon, too." ■