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Unions as ‘managers of precariousness’: The entrenchment of micro-corporatism in the Spanish automotive industry and its drawbacks

Introduction: the 2008 crisis as an opportunity conjuncture?

Political economy scholars have widely argued that the 2008 financial crisis and its particular unfolding in Europe have resulted from the overwhelming power of transnational capital over labour, and the uneven entrenchment of neoliberal policy making and labour market deregulation throughout different spatial scales (Jäger and Springer, 2015). Enhanced labour market competition has put national trade unions in a very difficult position, in which win-win coordination strategies are difficult to pursue due to the different, and often mutually opposed, immediate interests of their members (Erne, 2008; Bernaciak, 2013). Nevertheless, forms of collective resistance have existed at the national scale through, for example, the repeated organisation of general strikes, or at the transnational scale, as happened on 14 November, 2012, with the Pan-European general strike that mainly affected Southern European countries. However, despite the apparent upsurge of social mobilisations and prefigurative forms of working class resistance (Bailey et al. 2017; author(s), 2017), the overall landscape is gloomy: scattered forms of resistance have not coupled with increasing unionisation rates or more encompassing collective bargaining practices, and industrial conflict has often resulted more from the need to prevent factory shut-downs or lay-offs than from demanding for better working conditions (Urban, 2012). The current historical conjuncture puts national and European unions into a complicated situation in which they need to be more audacious, find new opportunities, and renew their strategic repertoire if they want to change the balance of forces (Hyman, 2015).

In Spain, social unrest has taken the form of three general strikes that mobilised millions of workers between 2010 and 2012, the emergence of the 15-M and Podemos, and the defence of citizen rights through various community organisations, such as the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca*, which demanded decent and affordable housing (Charnock et al. 2014; Bailey et al. 2018). Yet, the effectiveness of these general strikes in stopping austerity and labour market reforms has been limited. Neither have they been useful in increasing the legitimacy of the two largest trade unions, *Union*

General de Trabajadores (UGT) and *Comisiones Obreras* (CCOO), among young workers, or in reinforcing their associational ties with other radical unions and social movements, as they still remain suspicious of union elites (Pérez-de-Guzmán et al., 2016; Author(s), 2017). The use of general strikes as a major pressure against neoliberal policy making was questioned before the crisis (Rigby and Marco-Aledo, 2001) and after (Molina and Barranco, 2016): unions tended to only organise and over-represent protected-workers, especially public sector workers, to the detriment of more precarious workers or sectors more subject to global competition.

In contrast, what UGT and CCOO have predominantly sought is to preserve their institutional power through: (i) the recursive use of social dialogue (Molina and Miguelez, 2013; Rigby and Garcia-Calavia, 2017), and (ii) by winning trade union elections that enable them to engage in sector negotiations (Beneyto et al., 2016). The effectiveness of recent strategies has been criticised by other scholars. On the one hand, because corporatist practices have not produced overarching accords with positive clauses that protect workers from governments' unilateral macroeconomic policy making; instead, such agreements have established wage-ceilings and promoted calendar flexibility to secure labour-competitiveness (Martinez-Lucio, 2016). On the other hand, labour reforms have further decentralised those collective bargaining structures where UGT and CCOO felt at ease, undermining the capacity of their federations to sign sector collective agreements that could act as 'protective umbrellas' across the industry (Fernández-Rodríguez, et al. 2016). The latter problem is an old one too, since workplace disempowerment dates back to the democratic transition, the formation of the collective bargaining framework and the restructuring of the economy, in which UGT and CCOO prioritised sector-scale negotiations, especially provincial agreements, over engaging the rank-and-file and making them participants in the bargaining process in an increasingly fragmented economy (Martinez-Lucio, 1992; Köhler, 2001). Nevertheless, and as author(s) (2018a) show in a comparative case study at the sub-national scale, independentist trade unions in the Basque Country have challenged and dismissed the effectiveness of 'top-down' corporatist and collective bargaining practices, and sought to empower the workforce 'from bellow'.

This article expands the critique to corporatism at the lowest scale of collective bargaining, i.e. the workplace, and argues that the recursive adoption of micro-corporatist strategies against managerial prerogatives to reduce labour costs has nothing but enormously weakened unions, thus, reinforcing and worsening the globalisation trends originated and advanced by global capital since the 1980s. By micro-corporatism we mean institutionalised workplace/factory/company practices in

which working class actors 'alienate' or subordinate, to different degrees, their structural or long-term interests to capital in order to secure their short-term, economic, fractional and even organisational interests, including corporate profitability, employment, wage-levels or union representativeness (cf. Moody, 1997; Zagelmayer, 2001; Martin-Artiles, 2002). For example, Ortiz (1998; 2002) shows how UGT and CCOO accepted the introduction of 'teamwork' and other lean production techniques in exchange for capital investments at various car-assembly-plants during the late 1980s and early 1990s, giving in to managerial prerogatives in a context of increasing international labour market competition. This was a widespread solution across western countries (Zagelmayer, 2001; Erne, 2008; Bengtsson and Ryner, 2015). In contrast, and despite confronting similar pressures, author(s) (2018b) explain(s) how micro-corporatist strategies have been challenged by Basque unions repeatedly and, moreover, that their organising capacity has empowered workers both ideologically and economically. In that sense, Basque unions have made the point that there is 'room for manoeuvre' within a Spanish framework of industrial relations, and that organised labour can (relatively) resist generalised disempowering trends.

Insightfully, this article complements such analyses and makes a historical analysis of the Nissan-Zona-Franca assembly-plant (NZF) in the city of Barcelona to show how micro-corporatist strategies became progressively entrenched, and how these practices substantially disempowered the existing class unions, UGT and CCOO, both discursively and organisationally before the crisis. When the crisis emerged, the available strategic repertoire (Levesque and Murray, 2010) was already limited, and UGT and CCOO could pose no effective challenge to corporate threats of factory relocation. In order to preserve competitiveness, both unions agreed to lay-off 1,680 workers in 2008, to augment labour flexibility in 2011, and to extend the dual-wage-scale in 2013, a dual-wage-scale that was originally signed during the 2000s and which with the modifications of 2013, reached unbearable limits.

The overall result, apart from the progressive worsening of working conditions, has been dramatic, since the entrenchment of micro-corporatism fragmented workers' conditions, eroded factory solidarity and blurred the discourse of both unions as being defenders of workers' rights. In parallel, the yellow union presented itself as the 'pragmatist union' that could secure factory-competitiveness and employment, and gained power in the works council with the help of Nissan. By 2011, the yellow union was the most voted. Therefore, and in the absence of renewed strategic templates that pave the way for a rebalancing of forces from the local to the transnational scale, this article argues that the most representative class trade unions, like UGT and CCOO in

Spain, will increasingly be incapable of articulating and organising workers' discontent at workplace scale: instead, their main role is that of 'managing precariousness' as their major objective is that of preserving, not improving, an increasingly unstable and poorly paid employment contract. If displaced workers find and generate other ways to channel their discontent conservative positions will end up being overtaken by more confrontational and encompassing organisations. The latter, in the absence of any effective attempt for union renewal, would be an expression of the reinvigoration of working class power.

From 'managers of discontent' to 'managers of precariousness' Critical approaches have rightly conceptualised the everlasting tension or dilemma that unions face when either contesting or accepting capital's demands by qualifying them as 'managers of discontent' (Hyman, 2001: 29). In that sense, trade unions only *become* in and through their concrete struggles and pacts with capital and the capitalist state at the various spatial scales in which they operate, including the workplace but not only (Gramsci, 1977).

Generally speaking, 'corporatism involves political representation on the basis of a socially designated function, role, or task within the division of labour in a given economic space and is characterized by the formal equivalence of "corporations" whose members perform substantively different functions, [and which] are all expected to gain from collaboration and concerted action' (Jessop, 2016: 62, 64). During the 20th century, 'corporatist forms of organization were often introduced to address long term economic and social issues where complex, reciprocal interdependence requires long-term cooperation [...] in the expectation [...] that the organizations involved – or at least their leaders – would act in "non-political" ways to implement policies in the national interest' (Jessop, 2016: 64-65). Nevertheless, this consensual regulative process is recurrently undermined by the impossibility to conceal or satisfy the interests of 'all workers' and 'all capitalists' in market competition: for example, adopting wage restraint, labour flexibility or labour market fragmentation measures to either preserve corporate profitability or the sufficient monetary inflows that can pay for state's expenditures/debt (Panitch, 1981: 30-34; Jessop, 1990: 136-138; 164-166). Corporatism is thus the political process in which organised labour alienates part of its structurally irreconcilable class interests with capital, and embraces social peace under a hegemonic project that provides certain concessions and produces the necessary social harmony within a territory, normally the nation-state, to reproduce capital accumulation.

With the internationalization of manufacturing during the 1980s and 1990s, HR managers of large automotive companies started convincing union representatives that a mutually benefiting solution was possible if labour would constrain or give up their demands and accept the implementation of 'lean-production' techniques, calendar flexibility or dual-wage-scales (Stewart et al. 2008; author(s) 2018b). Similar to corporatism, micro-corporatism can be grasped as the recursive production of consent in between capital and labour at the workplace/factory/company scale in order to maintain corporate profitability high and, as a corollary, employment afloat (Zagelmayer, 2001; Moody, 1997). However, such 'win-win' strategy is very likely to be unconvincing for all: corporate short-term profitability rises but, and simultaneously, working conditions are undermined or fragmented, and market pressures to invest in technologically more advanced labour processes that could otherwise sustain real-wage growth rates diminish¹. Therefore, micro-corporatism does not defer from corporatism except from the scale in which capital and organised labour interact; both require the compliance of some working class fractions in order to displace others' interests whilst their overall collective power is eroded. In that sense, class organisations lose their momentum and slow the pace, if not become barriers, to further empowerment and social transformation.

This article goes further and argues that the intense repetition of micro-corporatist practices produces a *qualitative* change: in recursively downplaying a class discourse in favour of a 'pragmatic' one, trade unions and their representatives lose their ideological leverage in the formation, organisation and mobilisation of the rank-and-file and, hence, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish these 'self-claimed' class unions from conservative/yellow trade unions or, to the extreme, HR managers who always seek to gain workers' trust in the elimination of industrial conflict. Not sticking to the negotiation of new and better working conditions, wages and so on, allows corporate managers to take the lead and set thoroughly the rules of the game. Instead of maximising minimum standards, conservative strategies push class actors to become filters or minimisers of the maximum impact that global capital's demand to reduce labour costs has over the workforce. Rather than giving a collective meaning to otherwise individual economic interests, entrenched forms of micro-corporatism may

¹ Alaez and Beneto-Carmona (2008) show how low capital intensive factories in Spain have been more prone to relocation to Eastern Europe, Africa or Asia than more capitalised factories. At the same time, those factories would hold lower wage-levels. This means that in the New International Division of Labour not modernising production can provisionally be profitable for corporations as long as labour costs are kept relatively low (Charnock et al. 2016).

lead unions to adopt an inverted role and become ‘managers of precariousness’, that is, of only *limiting* capital’s thrive to dispose of labour as if it were any other productive factor or commodity. In such contested process of class legitimation, those lacking the various representative, economic or labour market resources to ‘voice’ their interests suffer the most (Standing, 2011: 8-14). Therefore, and despite enormous pressures to give up and ‘sign’ yet another competitiveness pact, standing to broader (normative) principles becomes necessary in the preservation of a particular notion of kinship which necessarily gives coherence and a sense of mutual trust to a, then newly formed, collective that has wider and deeper roots, incorporating senior and junior workers, core and precarious workers, and thus, transcending the particular collective bargaining dilemma they are confronting. This would enable trade unions not to set the problem corporately, as if collective bargaining patterns were a self-enclosed process in which workers and managers share similar responsibilities, but rather in broader historical and relational terms that question the hegemonic logic and bring emancipatory politics into the fore. Such dynamism, however, can only be achieved through the articulation of renewed and more inclusive forms of collective action that overcome any sort of ‘there is no alternative’ discourse.

Research Method

This study draws upon sixteen semi-structured interviews to union delegates and union officials in the province of Barcelona during the spring of 2015. In so doing, it has been possible to grasp union reps’ ‘world views’ and their logic behind the adoption of specific strategies (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) in particular historical conjunctures where their decisions mattered most. Representatives of the four unions present in the Nissan-Zona-Franca works council were interviewed. CCOO and UGT are the two largest Spanish unions with less than a million members each and 70% of the electoral vote (Beneyto et al. 2016). They both hold a social-democratic perspective to employment relations although CCOO, linked to the Spanish Communist Party and then to the United Left, has historically gathered more combatant sectors of the working class than UGT, linked to the social-democratic party (for a historical review see Köhler, 2001). Both have also been the two dominant unions in NZF until the 2000s when first UGT and later CCOO were surpassed by the yellow union. Representatives of the anarchosindicalist *Confederación General del Trabajo* (CGT) and from the yellow union *Sindicato Independiente Grupo Empresas Nissan* (SIGEN) were interviewed too. Interviews have been contrasted and complemented with an exhaustive revision of a number of collective agreements, archive documents and local newspapers.

From the democratic transition until the mid-1990s: Qualitative shift in collective bargaining in Nissan-Zona-Franca

Nissan-Zona-Franca (NZF) is an automobile and van assembly-plant that was established in 1971 on the outskirts of Barcelona, where the large industrial port of Zona-Franca is situated. Nissan took over control from Motor-Iberica (originally a Spanish-US capital company) and became the predominant shareholder in 1982, following the same expansionary strategy of Toyota to enter western markets. When the Spanish democratic transition occurred, NZF became a paradigmatic case of workers' resistance to Francoism. In spring 1976, around 2000 workers went on an indefinite wild-cat strike demanding freedom of association, better working conditions and higher salaries. The strike lasted 100 days, finding support from other factories and social movements in the region and in France. After three months, workers went back to work without having achieved their economic demands (CCOO1). The 100-day-strike was followed by a relatively long period of political calm and at the same time it brought about enormous structural transformations.

The introduction of 'lean production' techniques during the late 1980s and early 1990s met with strong opposition, especially with the introduction of the MTM (Methods-Time-Measurement). The rejection of new forms of measuring and organising the labour process resulted in a two day strike in 1985. It was successful. One year later, however, MTM found the support of the two more compromising trade unions, the yellow union SIGEN and UGT. Both claimed that such innovation was beneficial for the modernisation of the labour process and for enhancing factory competitiveness. It was openly opposed by CCOO and finally rejected in a referendum (CCOO1). The discursive fractioning between UGT and CCOO was counter-balanced by the radicalisation of CCOO that was able to gather the mass of the workforce. A new collective agreement was signed a few months later in which MTM could only be used 'to study' the labour process. The relative discursive empowerment and opposition of Nissan's workers after ten years of political calm, together with the growth that the Spanish automotive industry experienced during the 1980s, materialised in substantially better conditions and salaries (see X and XI-Collective-Agreements of 1990 and 1992).

However, CCOO's impetus declined after the negotiations of 1992 and 1994, in which MTM was finally introduced. CCOO being the dominant union articulating an oppositional strategy against 'lean production' (see also Ortiz, 1998; 2002), and with more than 40% of the representation in the works council (see Table 1), led the negotiations. MTM was initially challenged but CCOO finally agreed, as well as UGT and SIGEN which did not pose too many difficulties, in exchange for substantial

economic gains (CGT1; CCOO2; UGT1). According to a CCOO delegate, holding an oppositional strategy was complicated because

‘the company opted to fully modernise the factory in order to catch up with increasing international competition standards. Negotiations were complicated because they wanted to augment the working rhythm [through MTM], but we also gained a lot of money, and that... well it helps a lot (laugh). In any negotiation when there is money everything is more agile’ (CCOO1).

The legitimisation of concessionary positions during those negotiations by CCOO delegates had a double effect. First, CCOO delegates presented themselves as the effective alternative to UGT and SIGEN, arguing that through greater confrontation, better agreements could be achieved. As a result, in the 1995 union elections, CCOO consolidated its position, gaining 47% of the votes from the shop floor and 42.5% of the factory. Second, a radical fraction within CCOO, together with marginalised affiliates of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, merged and formed a branch of the anarcho-syndicalist CGT. This occurred as an increasing number of shop floor workers became discontent with CCOO. They understood that there would be no limit to worsening conditions through collective bargaining: corporations could always pay a bit more in exchange for introducing organisational and technological innovations to reduce both labour costs and workers’ control over the labour process.

The response of this new class fraction was to present an independent radical candidature at the 1995 elections to:

‘maintain the oppositional spirit of NZF workers during the transition, and those bargaining rounds before 1994, [because] bargaining dynamics were changing very fast. Instead of the workers, it was the company who demanded concessions and, since the MTM, one of the most import transformations was that the works council became defensive. The collective agreement was not a vindication any more, but a [conciliatory] agreement of exchange. Historically, we don’t believe that collective bargaining procedures should be like that; on the contrary, if we have an agreement it is, as a class, to achieve improvements in our working conditions. To this end, we have the agreement, our mobilisations and our weapons, that is all we have’ (CGT1).

Trade Union Elections in Nissan-Zona-Franca (1995-2015)													
Year	Census (Participation)	SIGEN			UGT			CCOO			CGT		
		Total	Workshop	Managers and Technicians	Total	Workshop	Managers and Technicians	Total	Workshop	Managers and Technicians	Total	Workshop	Managers and Technicians
1995	3.616 (87,3%)	23,8%	12,2%	50,1%	25,2%	28,2%	18,2%	42,5%	47,3%	31,7%	8,5%	12,3%	0,0%

Table1. Trade Union Elections in NZF. Source: CONC-Archive.

The contradictions of trying to incorporate the workforce under a micro-corporatist logic emerged in NZF when dominant unions, especially CCOO, found it impossible to legitimise the 1994 collective agreement in the eyes of critical shop floor workers who were going to directly suffer from greater stress and work intensity (e.g. Babson et al. 1995; Steward et al. 2008). The latter, who had previously been represented by CCOO during the 1970s and 1980s, conceived that they could better defend their class interests by organising a new union branch. Also, the maintenance of a collective memory of class struggle was perceived indispensable, since workplace struggles had been exemplary not only for new entrants that had less experience, but also for other workers in smaller factories in the region, who had less organisational capacity and could only mobilise if large factories took leadership (CGT²). In this sense, radical fractions in NZF understood well the strategic position of the NZF factory within Barcelona's manufacturing industry and along the lower nodes of the NZF-GVC. Nevertheless, after the 1994 agreement, the door to micro-corporatism in NZF was wide open.

Before the 2008 crisis: Unions sign their disarmament

The constitution of GVCs in the mid-1990s brought factory restructurings and relocations throughout the Spanish automotive industry (Peligros and Bilbao-Ubillos, 2005). Between 1995 and 1998 Nissan got rid of various productive branches in the Spanish territory, shrinking its corporate size, and completing the transformation into a GVC structure. In 1999 Nissan-Japan appeared to be in serious economic trouble; Renault stepped in and became a dominant shareholder of Nissan. The Renault-Nissan Alliance was born and the Nissan-Revival-Plan was implemented to reduce 30% of its production costs worldwide (Nissan News 2012).

For the workers of NZF, the unfolding events were harmful, although not devastating. The factory did not close down and remained viable within the Nissan-Renault group, yet new managers were brought into Nissan-Spain to introduce harsher collective bargaining practices (CCOO3; CGT2). Positively for NZF workers, Nissan-Renault's new capital investments facilitated the production of new models and maintained the operability of the factory (i.e. introducing the Renault *Traffic* in 2002 and the *Pathfinder* in 2004). However, not all of the assembly-lines were modernised and the new investments supported only half of the factory's production for ten years, while other assembly lines remained under-capitalised. Importantly, the uneven recapitalisation of the factory was detrimental to workers located in the under-capitalised assembly lines, and who suffered from the introduction of MTM without upgrading the ergonomics of their activities (SIGEN1; CGT1; CCOO1).

Together with factory modernisation, signing 'competitiveness pacts' progressively became the dominant logic of the works council. In 2002, a two-year collective agreement was signed separately by UGT and SIGEN in order to comply with the requirements of the Nissan-Revival-Plan. A permanent dual-wage-scale of 17% of gross salary reduction for new entrants and larger time-flexibility for shop floor workers were introduced (XVII Nissan Collective Agreement 2002; see Table 2 below). CCOO and CGT opposed the agreement because it produced a permanent economic stratification that would further undermine workers' collective identity (CGT1; CCOO4). Harsh quarrels between CCOO and UGT-SIGEN took place after the negotiations, and the agreement was taken to court by CCOO. They won the case one year later and the agreement was provisionally invalidated.

	TABLE 2. NZF Collective Agreements 1990-2007				
	Annual Working Time	Wages	Flexibility	Double-Wage Scale	Subscribed By
X Collective Agreement 1990-1991	1792h > 1786h	CPI + 2.5%	-	-	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO
XII Collective Agreement 1994-1995	1778h (Introduction of MTM)	15% One-Off Wage Rise For Introduction of MTM	6 Productive Saturdays Bank Hours' +/- 6 Days	-	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO
XVII Collective Agreement 2002-2003	1754h > 1746h	CPI + 2% (2002) & CPI (2003)	10 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/- 10 Days	17% Permanent Lower For New Workers Operating Under MTM	SIGEN / UGT
XVIII Collective Agreement 2004-2005	1746h (Intensification of MTM + Increment of 6h)	CPI	10 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/- 10 Days	Five Strata (5 Years) Wage	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO

Table 2. Collective Agreements in NZF. Source: CONC-Archive.

The use of judicial mechanisms allowed CCOO delegates to offset UGT-SIGEN concessionary positions. Nissan did not like the verdict and placed 850 dismissals on the bargaining table, 30% of around a total of 3,000 workers. At the same time, Nissan halted the assembly-line of the *Pathfinder*, and the company threatened to take the *Pathfinder* to Asia. Due to the risk of losing capital investments and entering into a spiral of dismissals, CCOO delegates preferred not to take any further industrial action and adopted a concessive position. After an intense week of negotiations, a four-year collective agreement was signed (with the absence of CGT) in which a temporary dual-wage-scale of five years was introduced to reduce labour costs (XVIII-Nissan-Collective-Agreement / 2004).

According to SIGEN1, UGT1 and UGT2, CCOO delegates had played a very ambiguous role during these negotiations because, while they had opposed the permanent dual-wage-scale of 2002, they agreed to implement another in 2004, as well as to increase the working pace and expand daily working time - clauses that the 2002 agreement did not include. This generated confusion among the workforce, since CCOO, who led the confrontational coalition, finally adopted the position of the conservative unions and legitimised the modifications while, at the same time, they still sought to present themselves to the workforce as the only union that could improve workers' conditions. UGT delegates did not fight further because, and despite:

[dual-wage-scales are] very dangerous for union action, there are moments in which *you feel compelled* to accept them, because when you sit on a negotiation table and 3,000 to 4,000 families depend on you, you need to make difficult decisions (UGT2). When there is a risk of closing the factory down, even though it is only 3% probable, you sit down to think and you tell yourself: 'I'm in a very nasty position'. (UGT1).

Fundamentally, their problem turned upon their shrinking labour market power that undermined their capacity to bargain for decent conditions as corporatism spread across other automotive factories in Spain (Llorente-Galera, 2007; author(s), 2018b).

Pursuing old-style confrontational strategies became so problematic that CCOO delegates started to perceive micro-corporatism as a beneficial solution:

‘The problem emerges when comparing [costs], because we have a very big problem in syndicalism, and that is the lack of coordination [in the industry]. In order words, I do not want to sign a dual-wage-scale. Why? For principles: because it goes against syndicalism, it is unjust and I defend workers. But if my CCOO comrade from another factory signs it, then they have opened a new path. And here [Nissan] came threatening us that the rest [of the Spanish assembly plants] already had them: “That is not possible; that the rest of factories have them and that you tell me that I cannot have one, because then [the factory] cannot compete with the rest” (CCOO5).

Buying into a competitive logic is not only ‘reasonable’ from the position of managers (Stewart, 2014), but also from the position of workers and trade union delegates, who in the absence of any other foreseeable solution, want to secure their immediate employment contracts in what was perceived to be a prisoners-dilemma game (Hancké, 2000). However, such a fatalist position embraces the hegemonic logic of capital because it tends to assume that unions *are* co-determinants of capitalist investment allocations, i.e. that unions can maintain employment if they actively engage in managerial roles like designing the wage-structure of the workforce. In this sense, embracing a micro-corporatist logic implies unions’ strategic alienation because they perceive themselves to be co-responsible for the shrinking profitability of the factory and, consequently, their undermined position in the labour market, hence, forcing them to subordinate their interests to those of the corporation in order to preserve their employment contract ‘intact’. In contrast, to escape from such deadlock, unions could depart from accepting their structurally subordinated position and the impossibility to be co-responsible for corporate investment decision making. Freeing themselves from such a disciplining burden may allow them to seek for new forms of resistance that challenge, rather than accept, a particular balance of forces. Unsurprisingly, the concessions that the works council of NZF agreed in 2004, soon became insufficient for the maintenance of factory competitiveness after the 2008 financial crisis erupted.

Moreover, CCOO’s discursive disempowerment between 1994 and 2004 allowed for the organisational entrenchment of clientelist practices in the works council and across day-to-day employee relations. CCOO, SIGEN and UGT benefited from the practice of controlling the admission of new employees (SIGEN1; CCOO1), a practice common throughout the Spanish automotive industry (Martin-Artiles, 2002). CGT remained

marginalised from such activities as it did not sign the collective agreements, although their representation in the works council did not change because they were the last resort for those workers disenchanted with the other unions. SIGEN became the union benefiting the most from these practices because Nissan strove to increase its representation in the works council (CCOO2; CGT1; UGT2). Hence, the loss of a solidarity identity materialised not only in the erosion and fragmentation of working conditions, but also in the growth of SIGEN. The inability of UGT and CCOO to differentiate their strategies in the eyes of the workers allowed anti-union networks to spread with the help of the corporation, since SIGEN's workers would not risk managerial discrimination.

After the 2008 crisis: The yellow union supplants class unions as dismissals and competitiveness-pacts multiply

Demand and output forecasts shrank in NZF by 40% after the 2008 financial crisis erupted. Managers sought to cut factory employment to preserve the large revenues that they had accumulated since 2003, and proposed a collective dismissal of 450 workers. This was opposed by the four unions. Around 2,600 workers mobilised, organising one-hour strikes on various days, and blocking the circulation of one of the main arterial roads of Barcelona. In exchange for flexibility and temporary dismissals, the company stepped down and agreed not to fire anyone. UGT, CCOO and SIGEN agreed on what was thought the 'less evil' of the solutions.

Such agreement was only provisional because Nissan redoubled its attack several months later, announcing the dismissal of 1,680 workers – more than a third of the total workforce. This ignited union fear because it could mean a rapid step towards factory shut down (UGT2; SIGEN1). Several days of protest and demonstrations were organised: more than 3,000 workers marched through the city centre of Barcelona in order to transcend the boundaries of the factory and make it of public concern:

During those mobilisations, the strategy was to pull society on our side and attack the company and politicians, because if it was a matter of closing the factory, politicians had to step in too. [...] We demonstrated and people followed us. We walked around the city centre of Barcelona and the atmosphere was impressive; people would come out on the balconies, they would applaud us. By the end of the march, firemen who were also mobilising [against austerity] joined us spontaneously; they took out the fire-trucks... such uproar we caused [laughs] (CCOO6).

Pursuing a united front empowered NZF workers ideologically: both because their collective identity was radicalised, since ‘all workers were together under the same banner’; and, at the same time, because they secured the backing of public opinion, building a stronger sentiment in the province of Barcelona to defend employment, and pressuring the government to step in (CCOO7). Mobilisations managed to stop the immediate dismissal of more than 1,200 workers before Christmas 2008. 400 workers agreed to enter early retirement schemes or accepted relatively well-compensated leave packages. However, there were still another 1,200 dismissals on the table.

During winter and spring 2009, a long process of negotiations started. Here, CCOO and UGT led the negotiations and pursued more conservative positions (CCOO7; UGT3). In order to attract capital investments and to adjust productive capacity to make the factory profitable, factory managers argued that the adequate number of employees was not 4,100, but around 2,900. CCOO and UGT accepted such a threshold in exchange for an industrial plan for factory viability. The agreement also established that after the collective dismissals, union representation should remain equal in the works council to avoid discrimination. During the winter and spring negotiations, another 400 workers left, accepting early retirement schemes or monetary compensation.

By summer 2009, 800 workers still had to be dismissed in order to reach the 2,900 threshold that had been agreed by CCOO and UGT. One day, the company unilaterally chose 698 workers randomly and denied them entrance into the factory without any prior notification; a very tense situation erupted outside the factory. Some workers’ access-cards were blocked and fired workers protested and quarrelled behind the entrance turnstiles while vehicle assembly continued. During the next few weeks, dismissed workers protested in front of the factory, igniting fierce fights between CCOO and CGT delegates, since the former had not mobilised the workforce to halt production.

As a result, the oppositional collective strategy that had empowered unions during 2008 was rapidly dismantled, and CCOO lost part of its affiliation owing to its poor handling of the dismissals (CCOO2; CCOO6; CCOO8). The empowering role that union delegates had in organising the rank-and-file was curtailed and CCOO’s leadership in the works council was overtaken by SIGEN, who became the most voted union in the factory, and second among assembly workers (Table 1 above).

Problems mounted again after Nissan stopped the allocation of the capital investments that had promised in exchange for the collective dismissals, and asked the collective agreement to be subjected to substantial revisions in order to enhance factory competitiveness within the Nissan-Renault group further. Against this threat, concessionary positions once again became the ultimate solution for UGT and CCOO delegates to bypass the dilemma. Between 2009 and 2015, two collective agreements that did not modify prior conditions were signed (XX and XXI Collective Agreements / 2009 and 2012). Yet, these two agreements were followed by two extra modifications in the form of explicit ‘competitiveness pacts’, in 2011 and 2013 (see Table 3 below). The company understood that the agreements of 2009 and 2012 were ‘too good’ and forced unions to revise them. The four unions perceived corporate demands in a similar way: namely, that ‘competitiveness pacts’ are not necessarily signed to secure employment in the long run but are, instead, implemented to reduce labour costs and increase factory profitability in the very short run (CCOO8; UGT2; CGT1; SIGEN1).

	TABLE 3. NISSAN-ZF Collective Agreements 2009-2015				
	Annual Working Time	Wages	Flexibility	Double-Wage-Scale	Subscribed By
Collective Agreement 2009-2010	1746h	CPI	10 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/-10 Days	Five Strata (5 Years) Wage Dispersion 25%	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO / CGT
Competitiveness Pact 2011-2012	1746h (Increment of Average Daily Working Time)	CPI	15 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/-15 Days	Five Strata (5 Years) Wage Dispersion 25%	SIGEN / UGT
Collective Agreement 2012-2014	1746h	CPI	15 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/-15 Days	Five Strata (5 Years) Wage Dispersion 25%	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO
Competitiveness Pact 2013-2015	1746h > 1757h (Modification of MTM to IE Standard Times)	CPI	15 Saturdays 'Bank Hours' +/-15 Days	Six Strata (6 years) Wage Dispersion 38,5%	SIGEN / UGT / CCOO

Table 3. Collective Agreements in NZF. Source: CONC-Archive.

Nevertheless, the four unions held significantly different approaches towards collective bargaining, thus, showing how important union strategies are in the concrete form in which both collective power is produced and working conditions are regulated (cf. Martinez-Lucio, 2010; Benassi and Dorigatti, 2015). First, four unions (including CGT) signed the XX Collective Agreement / 2009 and only three signed the XXI Collective

Agreement / 2012. CGT signed the 2009 agreement because it consolidated workers conditions in a period of economic crisis, but it did not sign the 2012 agreement because it embodied the modifications of the 2011 competitiveness pact (CGT2). Second, in 2011, when SIGEN still held the second position in the works council, they agreed with UGT to modify the XX Collective Agreement / 2009 in order to secure the investment allocation for a vehicle (the *One-ton Pick-up*). CCOO and CGT opposed it. CCOO argued that the company would not allocate any model in the near future, as the information they had gathered at the EWC suggested (CCOO2; CCOO5); CGT, because it implied accepting Nissan's blackmail and subordinating workers' interests to those of Nissan (CGT3). The 2011 competitiveness pact was taken to referendum and it was agreed by 70% of workforce, and the company agreed to allocate the *One-ton Pick-up* to secure factory viability for ten years in exchange for economic concessions.

Soon after the signing of the 2011 competitiveness pact, factory output increased, but capital investments *did not* come, and new and cheap employees were hired under the supervision of SIGEN and UGT. SIGEN benefited again proportionally more in the employment selection procedures and one month after became the most voted union in union elections. SIGEN's success was underpinned by CCOO's, UGT's and CGT's inability to put forward any convincing alternative to the dismissals of 2009 and the competitiveness pact of 2011.

According to SIGEN¹, their union is not the only one that seeks to engage in social dialogue with Nissan: UGT and CCOO who, despite presenting themselves as class unions, are also eager to subordinate workers' interests to those of the company in order to secure factory profitability. Six months after the XXI Collective Agreement / 2012 had been signed by SIGEN, UGT and CCOO in July 2012, Nissan came again with another proposal to consolidate factory competitiveness and to expand production from 150,000 to 200,000 vehicles. However, in this case, UGT broke its alliance with SIGEN and turned to CCOO in order to develop a more consistent resistance strategy and to impede further retrenchment of workers' conditions. The turn to a more confrontational strategy was encouraged by UGT's Metal Federation in Barcelona and by critical UGT affiliates in NZF. These were preoccupied by the shrinking representation of UGT in the works council and its subordination to SIGEN or CCOO (UGT3; UGT4). This strategic shift was viewed favourably by CCOO delegates, who decided to jointly oppose Nissan and SIGEN (CCOO2; CCOO4; CCOO8). Yet, as a result of the previous negotiations that increased SIGEN representation in the factory, the context in which to develop an oppositional strategy was too adverse:

Unions are a reflection of society and they will reach as far as their membership asks them to do so. If people bow down and accept [anything], the union, by definition, tends to go down too. And this is what has happened to us in NZF. I have been working in the factory for 23 years and I have seen how workers have changed very much. [...] We are officially the same unions but the strength of the works council depends on the support of the workers. [...] And when union delegates go to the canteen in order to inform them about what SIGEN has agreed [i.e. the second competitiveness pact in 2013], and you see that there is little reaction from the workforce, then you realise that we have a *big problem*. If you don't have the support of the people, your capacity to flip any negotiation is very complicated (UGT1).

CCOO and UGT delegates experienced high social pressure from workers and their families, but also from the media and the regional government as all pushed them to negotiate (if not to accept) on Nissan's terms. After several negotiations in a joint assembly between UGT and CCOO delegates and affiliates in Barcelona, 700 workers voted and accepted a new version of the agreement. According to two CCOO delegates, it was impossible to turn the negotiations around in their favour because fear had spread throughout the workforce:

The context was one of pressure, pressure, pressure. In the negotiations of 2013 we put a lot of effort into convincing the workers that it was just Nissan's strategy [of blackmailing], that there was no real threat of relocation, that whatever we signed the factory would still have future. And some of them would trust us. But when the weekend arrived, [workers would meet their families] and the press would circulate news on the negotiation process... Workers' families, their wives and mothers, would call us, crying or yelling at us about what we were doing: that we were endangering the jobs of their husbands and sons. And those workers that once were convinced were coming back on Monday utterly scared. Press, press, press. TV, TV, TV. It was something spectacular. [...] Just before Christmas, during the *last morning* shift on the 23rd of December, factory managers stopped the production line and made an announcement through the speakers about the risky situation of the factory. They were blaming CCOO for not agreeing to the permanent dual-wage-scale. They were inviting workers to come to our office and convince us to sign it. They didn't talk about UGT or CGT, who wouldn't sign the agreement too, they *only*

mentioned us: 'go to CCOO's office and convince them'. (CCOO5; emphasis in original).

The fractioning of the works council and the shrinking of trade unions' discursive power to engage the rank-and-file elicited very few responses, and the modification of the collective agreement was approved by SIGEN, UGT and CCOO; while CGT remained opposed to it. What was perceived to be impossible to accept during the late 1980s and early 1990s became something quite normal for senior NZF workers, that is, to have substantial calendar flexibility and, most importantly, a wage difference of around 40% with new entrants who, nevertheless, performed similar tasks as senior workers:

'[During the 1990s] senior workers would always take care of new ones, to protect and teach them how the factory functioned; nobody would accept a dual-wage-scale, all had to earn the same. However, during the [2013] negotiations CCOO delegates proposed that their affiliation reduce the average salary of the senior workers so that the dual-wage-scale would be reduced and we could comply simultaneously with corporate demands to reduce labour costs. Nobody accepted it, [senior workers] didn't want their pockets to be tightened and so we couldn't advance our proposal to Nissan, who didn't want it either and preferred to keep us divided' (CCOO4).

The steady economic and discursive disempowerment of NZF workers since 1994 culminated in the modification of the 2012 agreement in 2013, with a reinforced stratification and flexibilisation of workers conditions that was legitimised by UGT and CCOO as the least worst outcome, portraying themselves as co-responsible for workers' employment (in)stability. This, however, was the original objective of lean production (Moody 1997; Stewart et al. 2008; Stewart, 2014), and could only be challenged by the limited oscillation of the works council between more or less concessionary positions. The ensuing period has been one of relative calm, in which output growth has been accompanied by the employment of approximately 1,500 new workers, thus operating again at full capacity with 4,500 workers. However, new entrants have substantially lower salaries, temporary contracts and, as a result, are much less likely to unionise and adopt confrontational positions to re-invert their precarious situation (CCOO7; UGT2; CGT2).

Conclusion

The repeated signing of competitiveness pacts that fragmented and worsened working conditions across Europe from the mid-1990s became a widespread mechanism in and through which organised labour actively reproduced and reinforced transnational capitalist hegemony (Erne, 2008: 51-52; Urban 2012: 224; also Bengtsson and Ryner, 2015). UGT's and CCOO's adoption of concessionary positions in NZF during the crisis cannot be understood as an isolated case of micro-corporatism, but as a cumulative process that reproduced both prior collective bargaining practices within the factory and overarching neoliberal capitalist regulation dynamics in Spain and across western economies. In this sense, and based on the case study analysed hitherto, we may say that the 2008 financial crisis in Spain was predominantly economic but not necessarily political. Fundamentally, organised workers seemed unable to challenge the 'common sense' that gives primacy to 'economic competitiveness' and articulate new forms of collective action that could challenge pressures to reduce labour costs. Instead, unions' role has been one of 'managing precariousness' through progressively embracing, notwithstanding various moments of resistance, the 'there is no alternative' logic. The fragmentation of working conditions left the yellow union with ample space to challenge class unions' discourses, of course, with the help of the managers, and portray itself as the 'union that can secure workers' immediate interests best' (SIGEN₁).

When unions engage into micro-corporatism, the problem of factory relocation is displaced in time by undermining and fractioning working conditions *within* their domain. However, such temporal displacement of the possibility of terminating the employment contract is only provisional, since corporations still hold the sovereignty over investment allocation decisions and, quite paradoxically, that after reducing labour costs companies may not face so many pressures to invest further in such productive location to maintain certain profitability rates. Instead, it may be easier for them to make some savings and pay the fixed-costs of shutting down the factory, i.e. dismissal compensations, and move to a cheaper territory to exert similar productive activities in the always-transforming International Division of Labour (Charnock and Starosta, 2016). Inferring from our case study and those of Alaez and Beneto-Carmona (2008) and Charnock et al. (2016), this is what may have systematically happened in Spain after the 1990s, because the relocation of automotive suppliers occurred mainly in those companies in which labour standards were the lowest. Or to put it differently, when unions increasingly become 'managers of precariousness' their position is under severe risk since: (i) corporations ultimately hold the power of taking investment decisions and breaking the employment contract; (ii) a larger number of workers is

displaced from any cross-class pact, and leaves them no other (empowering) alternative than to dissent and organise in new ways.

In order to escape from such spiral, it is crucial that unions find new forms of organising workers' interests in more encompassing and lasting ways like, for example: (a) by dismissing the discourse that trade unions are co-responsible for the allocation of capital investments and the possible termination of the employment contract but, instead, that their fundamental role is, no matter what, to improve working conditions and to augment workers' control of the labour process; (b) making more efforts to organise junior and senior workers against dual-wage-scales or other forms of discrimination based on age, etc.; (c) engaging and giving more weight to precarious workers' experiences in both union meetings and the works council, so that the latter do not over-represent core-workers' interests; (d) strengthening the bonds with other competing factories in Europe, including that of the UK Nissan-Sunderland; (e) strengthening their bonds with direct suppliers and subcontractors in order to equalise working conditions within the factory and enhance daily-life solidarity; (f) pressure the local, regional and national government to not accept the reduction of labour costs and to difficult the possible relocation of the factory via legal protection and avoiding giving subsidies, etc.

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CCOO1 (22/06/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CCOO2 (18/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CCOO3 (09/06/15) Catalan Metal Federation official, Barcelona.

CCOO4 (02/06/15) Union member, rank-and-file, Barcelona.

CCOO5 (18/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CCOO6 (18/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CCOO7 (14/05/15) Union member, rank-and-file, Barcelona.

CCOO8 (08/05/15) Catalan Metal Federation official, Barcelona.

CGT1 (13/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CGT2 (13/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

CGT3 (13/05/15) Union member, rank-and-file, Barcelona.

SIGEN1 (27/05/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

UGT1 (07/07/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.

UGT2 (07/07/15) Union delegate at works council, Barcelona.
UGT3 (09/07/15) Union member, rank-and-file, Barcelona.
UGT4 (25/05/15) Catalan Metal Federation official, Barcelona.

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