Competitiveness Bargaining in France: A study of multiple union action in the automotive industry

1. Introduction

The trajectory of bargaining decentralisation from industry to company-level to boost economic competitiveness has deep roots in France. Alongside a raft of regulatory reform, the 2008 economic crisis deepened this process further, signalled by the signing of several competitiveness agreements (*accords de compétitivité*) in its wake (Freyssinet, 2013; Ancelovici, 2014; Amable, 2016)[1]. The ratification of company and plant-specific competitiveness agreements in crisis-ridden employers raises questions around how increasingly market-exposed labour relations effect and potentially erode workplace institutions characterised by distinct and long-standing cultural traditions (Hauptmeier, 2012). Such concerns are salient given France's multi-unionism, characterised by several unions of varying organisational cultures. Might convergence occur across traditionally different unions in responding to workplace competitiveness bargaining, encouraging them to put aside longstanding rivalries? Thus, under the threat of job loss and plant closure, do unions converge in response? What is the caliber of such responses and their impact for inter-union relations?

The picture at local-level is complicated further by a 2008 reform on *Social Democracy and Working Time*. Abolishing the 'presumption of representativeness' guaranteeing five trade union confederations access to workplaces since 1966, the 2008 law changed the rules, making local works council (*comité d'entreprise*) election results the measure of bargaining rights. Even if traditionally divergent unions converge in response to competitiveness, electoral rivalries may still encourage differentiation, inhibiting collaboration This paper

[1] See also media reports e.g. from national state media, France [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/economie/industrie/entreprises-les-accords-de-competitivite-signes-en-france_2760517.html]; *Le Monde* (2012) 'Accords compétitivité-emploi" : les louvoiements de la majorité', Available: https://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2012/09/11/accords-competitivite-emploi-les-louvoiements-de-la-majorite_1758393_823448.html

explores these matters by studying different local unions' responses to competitiveness bargaining under the new representativeness rules and examining the implications for inter-union relations.

In drawing upon evidence, the article presents case studies of two headline competitiveness agreements from the automotive industry ratified after the 2008 crisis - at Renault and *Groupe Peugeot Société Anonyme* (PSA). These competitiveness agreements concluded in 2013, were hailed as among "the first of their kind" in France given their comprehensive and long-term encompassment of pay, working time and a plethora of shop-floor matters in exchange for investment (Eurofound, 2013; Broughton et al. 2013). The agreements, signed under pronounced crisis, received significant attention[2] and were followed by others, predominately in the automotive supply chain, notably at Bosch and Michelin (but also other manufacturing sectors, like pharmaceuticals). The automotive sector was at the centre of adjustment pacts since the 2008 recession because, after banking and construction, the industry was severely affected and remains highly exposed to international competition and capital outflows (Van Biesebroeck and Sturgeon, 2010). It presents an ideal site for investigating concerns around multiple union responses and inter-union relations.

The article presents as follows: Section Two reviews issues raised by the negotiation of competitiveness agreements under conditions of French multi-unionism, considering the impact of the representativeness reforms. Section Three outlines the case studies' methodology and Section Four details the findings. Section Six concludes with discussion.

2. Negotiating competitiveness agreements under revised representativeness rules

[2] *Le Monde* (2013) 'Renault: les principaux points de l'accord de compétitivité', Available online [https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2013/03/07/renault-les-principaux-points-de-l-accord_1844175_3234.html]; *Libération* (2013) 'Accord social chez PSA: vraiment gagnant-gagnant?', Available online [http://www.liberation.fr/futurs/2013/10/22/accord-social-chez-psa-vraiment-gagnant-gagnant_941478]

The evolution of bargaining and representativeness in the French context

Legacies of union victimisation by employers and internal fragmentation in the labour movement historically made collective bargaining problematic in France (Guillaume et al, 2018; Howell, 2009). Indeed, unions were only formally recognised as holding a workplace presence in 1968 with the provision of *délégués syndicaux* (union delegates) who hold power to negotiate agreements. The state had begun to establish company-specific representative structures to promote peaceful interaction between management and workers in 1936, leaving conflict between unions and employers outside the firm (Laulom, 2012). This process began with *délégués du personnel* (employee delegates, DPs), whose function was grievance-handling, followed in 1945 by the introduction of works councils, holding information and consultation rights. Positions in both structures are typically occupied by union activists, although there is variation across industries, and non-union DPs can be prominent in small and medium enterprises, although rare in large companies (DARES, 2018). In 1966, the state attempted to enhance union legitimacy by awarding 'irrefragable representative' status to five confederations: the CFDT (*Confédération française démocratique du travail*), the CFE-CGC (*Confédération française de l'encadrement-Confédération générale des cadres*), the CFTC (*Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens*), the CGT (*Confédération générale du travail*), and FO (*Force ouvrière*). Representativeness was determined by, *inter alia*, unions' membership numbers and length of existence (Béroud et al, 2012), empowering those meeting the criteria to sign collective agreements. Given that sector-level bargaining dominated when the status was awarded, smaller 'representative' unions could sign agreements for entire industries, resulting in fragile agreements with little legitimacy (Labbé, 2001).

Over time, successive policy initiatives devolved collective bargaining to company-level. The 1982 *Auroux Laws* obliged employers to bargain annually on issues like pay (Chambost et al, 2009) and heralded a shift to decentralised bargaining. It received a mixed response from the country's unions. Some, such as the CGT and CFE-CGC, viewed firm-level bargaining

as a threat to their legitimacy (Barthélemy and Groux, 2012; Béthoux et al, 2013). Other unions, such as the CFDT, used bargaining decentralisation as an opportunity to refocus its strategy towards a "*syndicalisme d'adhérents*" (member-based unionism) (Guillaume and Pochic, 2009; Guillaume, 2014). With an emphasis on recruitment and members' participation in union action, this approach was deemed necessary by CFDT leadership to strengthen its local bargaining power *vis-à-vis* employers (ibid.).

Recent decades witnessed further reforms favouring company bargaining, again receiving a similar range of union responses. In 2004, the *Fillon Law* enabled company agreements to derogate from industry agreements in most areas of employment terms and conditions (Dirringer, 2016). To better align pre-existing representative structure with company bargaining, the 2008 reform on *Social Democracy and Working Time* sought to bring unions closer to the workforce by modifying the representative status granted in 1966 (Boulin, 2008; Rojot, 2014). Local works council election scores became the measure of representativeness rather than affiliation to nationally representative confederations (Farvaque, 2016). Although works council elections are not new to France's system of representation, this constituted the first time they were used to determine bargaining rights (Yon, 2012). Trade unions monopolise the first round of elections, with a second round only occurring if union candidates fail to obtain half the available votes. The 2008 law prescribed that unions need 10% of votes before they can participate in negotiating agreements, and collective agreements must be validated by one or several unions holding at least 30% representativeness. Initially, unions holding 50% or more were given powers to obstruct agreements struck between other unions and employers. However, the *El-Khomri Law* in 2016 raised ratification thresholds to 50%, and removed the right to obstruct[3].

[3] This trajectory was further reinforced by the *Ordonnances Macron* (Macron Orders), which entered into force in early 2018. These Orders were aimed at "reinforcing social dialogue" in firms and served to, *inter alia*, expand once more the range of issues covered by firm-level bargaining, and merge the various institutions of workplace representation into a single body- the *Comité social et économique* (CSE).

Larger unions such as the CFDT and CGT were welcoming of the 2008 representative reform, perceiving it as a way to 'crowd out' smaller rivals by their greater capacity to divert resources to electoral campaigns (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2008). Squeezed by threshold requirements, smaller unions would be forced to consolidate with other unions through merger (Yon and Béroud, 2013). Alternatively, the reform could allow smaller unions, particularly the so-called 'autonomous unions' unaffiliated with the traditional representative status, to expand influence at workplace level and amass bargaining power (Farvaque, 2016; Béroud et al, 2013). Arguably this could prove a threat to unions previously guaranteed institutional security by encouraging more competitors into the electoral fray, fragmenting the vote and potentially weakening larger unions.

Competitiveness Bargaining in a period of crisis

These bargaining and representative reforms represent a continuing attempt by the state and employers to enhance labour flexibility amid persistent problems of national competitiveness (INSEE, 2014). A reflection of France's lack of competitiveness is employers threatening *délocalisation* (relocation), a controversial development resulting in high-profile political pressure for indigenous companies to remain at home (Mathieu and Sterdyniak, 2005). In exchange for doing so, French employers call repeatedly for greater cost (labour) competitiveness (Beaujolin-Bellet and Schmidt, 2012) fostering a favourable environment for a new round of competitiveness agreements since the 2007-08 crisis (Broughton et al, 2013)[4]. Indeed, the best-known experimentation on competitiveness agreements in France was on working time in the 1990s and early 2000s, driven by a need to comply with the government-regulated reduced working week instigated by the *Aubry* and *Robien* laws (Gilles, 2006). Legislatively mandated working time reductions were introduced via negotiations in ways that did not harm company competitiveness (Freyssinet and Seifert, 2001). These agreements traded reduced working weeks for the creation or preservation of

[4] For a European-wide perspective see Glassner et al. (2011)

jobs, while also allowing adjustments for scheduling flexibility during less busy periods (Sisson and Artiles, 2000; Richevaux, 2001).

However, these working time competitiveness agreements were not driven by the financial circumstances of individual employers in crisis. In contrast, the post-crisis agreements emerging in the last decade were induced under conditions of economic recession, where the risks of job loss and plant closure were real and immediate. These types of competitiveness agreements have occurred among crisis-ridden manufacturers since 2008. While incorporating similar measures to those agreed in the 1990s/2000s by linking working time flexibility with employment, these more recent competitiveness agreements cover a greater range of issues, such as pay, shop-floor organisation and training in exchange for guarantees of investment and employment preservation. Then-President Sarkozy actively championed competitiveness agreements in this period, arguing that they allow employers and employees to "talk freely" about employment, pay and flexibility[5].

Further bargaining reforms reinforced this trajectory. In 2013, the *Employment Securitisation Law* allowed employers in "severe economic stress" to negotiate temporary competitiveness agreements permitting changes in working hours and wage reductions in exchange for job guarantees (Sauviat and Serfati, 2013:34). Nationally, the CGT and FO criticised competitiveness agreements as wage reduction measures, refusing to support the Employment Securitisation Law, which instigated their negotiation in firms throughout the country. In contrast, the CFDT, CFE-CGC and CFTC national confederations supported the law, having signed the national 'interprofessional' agreement which formed the basis of the legal text (Freyssinet, 2013). More recently, the *El-Khomri Law* provided legal priority to company-level agreements on working time, overtime pay, leave and rest, even if terms are less favourable to employees than those agreed sectorally. Again, union reactions to these

[5] Le Monde (2012) *Les « accords compétitivité-emploi » ou la fin du droit du travail,* Available [https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/03/26/les-accords-competitivite-emploi-ou-la-fin-du-droit-du-travail_1674925_3232.html]

laws ranged from the CGT and FO's outright rejection to more nuanced approaches from the CFDT, CFE-CGC and the CFTC focusing on balancing flexibility and security (Andolfatto and Labbé, 2016).

Implications for unions: union responses and inter-union relations

How are union responses to competitiveness bargaining developing under the new representativeness rules? There are several strands to such an exploration which warrant unpacking. First, how might unions respond to the pressures of competitiveness bargaining? One view from the literature on decentralised bargaining suggests that company and plant unions might move towards 'micro-corporatism' (Daley, 1999; Howell, 2009). Isolated at enterprise-level and exposed to job loss and factory closure, local unions become incentivised to cooperate with employers in ratifying competitiveness agreements. French unions' workplace presence is frequently weak, characterised by a paucity of members and activists, or 'virtual unionism' (Howell, 2009), which is ascribed to legacies of sectoral bargaining (see also, Tallard and Vincent, 2014). Fragile workplace unions are liable to acquiesce to the employer's competitiveness agenda, particularly if whipsawed with cheaper locales elsewhere. 'Negotiations' become little more than a façade for managerial unilateralism (See Pernot, 2018: 44, 49, 55-57).

An alternative view suggests local unions may respond to competitiveness bargaining differently. Rather than succumbing to a cooperative bias, local unions can overcome weaknesses by leveraging state intervention to protect employment and working conditions, particularly in high-profile employers (Parsons, 2013a,b). French unionists may exploit a political climate sensitive to fears of globalization and an 'Anglo-Saxon' style race to the bottom via mobilisation (Parsons, 2013a). As Pernot (2018: 57) notes, French unions at the very least retain their "discursive ability" to challenge employers with some remarkable evidence of radical opposition found in employers unlawfully confined and workers threatening to 'blow up the factory' (Pernot, 2018: 54). Less accommodative responses to

competitiveness bargaining would also be in keeping with a large part of the national (if somewhat stylized) industrial relations culture which associates bargaining with protest and mobilisation (Béroud and Mouriaux, 2001; Clift, 2012).

Aside from this literature saying nothing about how different unions may be inclined to one approach over others, it also rarely considers how the new representative rules can potentially complicate union responses (Béthoux and Jobert, 2012). The wishes of the local electorate may sway unions and - if recent polling is to be believed- employees may not approve of union actions perceived as 'too ideological' or 'too political' (TNS-Sofres, 2015). This might weaken union branches' willingness to call for adversarial mobilisations for fear of being perceived as distant from employees' needs. Nonetheless, unions' utility may be questioned if they fail to adequately balance between concession and capitulation and descend into a micro-corporatist position. Too cooperative may risk being outmanoeuvred by more militant unions, capitalising on employee discontent.

The pluralistic structure of workplace representation in France also means that elected representatives must work with other unions, raising a second matter of inter-union relations. Inter-union rivalry is well-known, driven by different organisational cultures and exacerbated by competition for votes in works council elections (Amable, 2016). Organisational culture is understood here to refer to both the main cultural values associated with individual unions, but also their preferred repertoires of organising union action both in terms of internal union structure and preferred relations to employers (see also McCormick and Hyman, 2013: 91). As Swidler (1986 :273) notes, culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values towards which action is orientated, but by shaping a repertoire or tool kit of styles which actors construct strategies of action. In the main, French confederal union structure organises at national, sectoral (with various associating federal branches), company and plant levels. France's bargaining structure meant that national and sectoral levels traditionally dominated within each confederation, although the rise of local-level bargaining

has raised the prominence of local-level delegates. There are, formally, significant differences across the unions. The CFE-CGC, a highly centralized union, views itself as non-political, favourable to the 'middle classes' and a defender of 'merit' against the alleged 'egalitarian' postures of other unions (Béthoux et al, 2013). It is a 'categorical' union representing only second (non-manual, supervisory) and third (managerial) colleges of staff[6]. Although its orientation has shifted over the decades, the CFDT follows a "*syndicalisme de proposition*" (unionism of proposals), a 'pragmatic' vision emphasising results and compromise, reconciling the interests of the business with those of employees (Barthélemy and Groux, 2012; Rey, 2012; Ancelovi, 2014). CFDT members appear to hold a cohesive view of union practices, values and political stances, in part because many dissenters left to join the autonomous Solidaires, Unitaires, Démocratiques (SUD) (Barthélemy, 2012; Guillaume, 2014).

While cognisant of internal tensions in the confederation, the CGT is regarded as pursuing a "*syndicalisme de conquête*" (unionism of conquest) with the intent of mobilising against the power of 'globalised capital' (Piotet, 2009). However, it is noteworthy that recent observations indicate that, in the private sector, the CGT signs almost as many company-level agreements as the other unions (DARES, 2017; Laroche and Salesina, 2018). The union has traditionally adopted a loose internal administration described as 'organised anarchy' (Thomas, 2013) and there are long-standing problems of cohesion and internal disunity (Bensoussan, 2009; Piotet, 2009). In contrast, Pernot (2010) argues that, while the CFTC's leadership remains close to a traditional Catholicism, the rank-and-file are moving towards more secular views to the extent that differences with CFDT, CFE-CGC and FO are blurring; a *rapprochement* with one of the latter is plausible. The CFTC (2017) indicates that it local unions are sovereign as this allows closer relations with the rank-and-file members.

[6] 'Colleges' refer to the electoral-representative structure based on proportional representation. There are separate electoral colleges for the three categories of employees (first: manual, second: non-manual and supervisory, and third: managerial). As a 'categorical' union, the CFE-CGC only requires 10% of the vote in the colleges it represents (rather than 10% of the overall vote like the other unions).

Finally, the FO's leadership describes the confederation as following a "militant reformism" situated between 'politicised reformism' and 'conflictual unionism' (Andolfatto, 2007:41). Scholars express puzzlement at the apparent paradox of FO's confederal approach of "contestation" and its grassroots' seeming preference for "contractual unionism" (Barthélemy and Groux, 2012:102). Yon (2009) argues that this 'contradiction' between FO's confederal discourse and local sections' practice can be explained by the fact that not all activists are invested in the confederal sphere. Local-level needs may drive local activists rather than confederal policy, and, as such, grassroots sections can diverge significantly from the confederal stance (ibid.).

This last point is salient. While varying organisational cultures across unions have served to embed inter-union distinctions and encourage rivalry, these could be weakened under greater exposure to competitiveness problems at company-level, rendering differences immaterial as local unions look to pragmatically preserve jobs and investment. A company competitiveness crisis marked by threatened job loss could be conceived as a shared problem requiring a joint union response, encouraging cooperation in negotiating an agreement (cf. Walsh, 1994). Proportional representation at the bargaining table may also dampen rivalry, particularly where the 30% bargaining threshold is individually unattainable and single unions are unable to accomplish negotiation objectives alone. Under threatened job loss, plant closure, and investment flight, local trade union representatives may become pragmatic in their dealings with other unions' representatives, potentially encouraging new patterns of workplace alliance. Yet, if the structure of representation might encourage inter-union cooperation, it may also hinder it. Rivalry may prove too powerful for the protagonists to overcome under the pressure of electoral competition and institutional security. Aside from the fact that there may be a lack of agreement over preferred action vis-à-vis competitiveness bargaining, unions may fail to cooperate because of disparities in the need to do so, particularly in cases where one union commands majoritarian representativeness

and can act without recourse to others. Thus, the picture for inter-relations appears uncertain and complex.

In light of the above, the following sections will explore these matters by asking how different local union responses to competitiveness bargaining are developing under the new representativeness structure and how inter-union relations develop given the combined pressures of competitiveness and representativeness.

4. Method and Case Studies Context

The 'how' nature of the questions lend itself to case study analysis (Yin, 2013:11). Two case studies are deployed from the French automotive sector, Renault and PSA, where competitiveness agreements were first signed in March and October 2013 respectively under the threat of investment loss and factory closure at Renault Batilly and Cléon and PSA Rennes and Sevelnord. Signatures of the two firms' competitiveness agreements occurred almost immediately before the second cycle of local works council elections under the 2008 representativeness reform. The Renault agreement, *inter alia*, provided for a 2013 wage freeze, followed by wage moderation for 2014 and 2015. Increases in working time from 32 to an average of 35 hours per week were secured, and compulsory Saturday working at management's discretion without overtime pay was agreed. The PSA agreement, *inter alia* provided for wage moderation (including pay freezes in 2013 and 2014), stricter limits on reduced working days, greater manufacturing flexibility in terms of production workload redistribution of annual leave and obligatory overtime during busy periods.

Both firms are seen as 'national champions', dominate the French automotive industry and account for over half the sector's employment (CCFA, 2018). Yet this industry has been in difficulty for the past two decades. Consumer demand has re-orientated to low-mid range automotive segments, requiring cheaper builds. This has proved problematic in French plants, given the relatively high cost base. To preserve margins, both PSA and Renault

offshored to low-cost assembly plants in Eastern Europe and Turkey. French plants have been lumbered with the less commercially successful high-mid and premium models. The 2008 crisis exacerbated the industry's problems, resulting in the near-closure of Renault's Sandouville plant, saved only by government intervention in 2008, and the outright closure of PSA Aulnay, employing 4,000, in 2013. A combination of crisis and relocation induced falling employment numbers nationally: whereas 321,000 people worked in the automotive sector in 2000, this fell to 220,000 in 2010 and is now 213,000 as of 2017. PSA and Renault's workforces diminished by approximately 25 percent in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis. Not only is the case study useful in providing detail on the competitiveness agreements emerging amid crisis, job loss and potential plant closure, but that both agreements were signed just before the second round of elections after the 2008 reform offers insight into decentralised bargaining under the new rules. Furthermore, the two companies exemplify multi-unionism, allowing an examination of the research concerns. Seven unions are active across both firms (see Table 2).

While both employers' industrial relations histories are well-documented, some background comments are appropriate. PSA's history is complex and fragmented due to its merger with Citroën and Chrysler-Europe subsidiaries. Each of the three had their own separate employment relations policy in terms of classification systems, wages, pensions, and benefits, resulting from practices, tradition, or union victories linked to the history of each individual company (Loubet, 2001). As a family business, Peugeot aimed to marginalise unions by a paternalistic approach, offering housing, transport and shops for food and other goods to its workers (Gallard, 2004). Chrysler-Europe's subsidiaries Simca and Talbot, and to a certain extent Citroën, were governed by a strong internal 'yellow' union (*Confédération française du travail*, CFT, later forming part of *Groupement des Syndicats Européens de l'Automobile*, GSEA) which suppressed the CGT and attempted to quash industrial unrest (Loubet and Hatzfeld, 2002). Hatzfeld (2016) describes the legal battle resulting from PSA's history of victimising CGT and CFDT representatives, where management discriminated

against activists from both unions in terms of work duties, remuneration and career progression. Management also encouraged workers to join the other unions like FO, the CFTC and CFT (later GSEA)(Hatzfeld, 2016). Over recent years, representativeness patterns at PSA have evolved. Increased prominence of research and development and high-end engineering roles as low-skilled assembly work is automated and offshored results in the rise of the categorical CFE-CGC as most representative union. Reflecting these trends, the CGT votes have waned, although it remains an equal second alongside FO.

Expropriated by the state and nationalised in 1945, Renault became a pattern-setter for labour relations in the country, with a history of company agreements often forming the basis for wider transposition across metalworking industry. As a state-owned company in the post-war period, Renault boasted a tradition as an innovator in socially progressive agreements, such as the 1955 firm-level agreement which guaranteed employee purchasing power through automatic cost-of-living adjustments (Freyssenet, 1998). Yet the company has also experienced militant union action, with many of its plants experiencing bitter strikes throughout history. Prior to the 1980s, management were relatively submissive to the then-dominant CGT, 'buying' peace through wage increases following bouts of strike action (Hancké, 1996). As Renault faced competitive crisis throughout the 1980s and 1990s and underwent privatisation (albeit with the state continuing to hold around 15%), new conflicts emerged. Successive CGT-led strikes against pay and production reforms failed, weakening its popularity among the workforce (Loubet, 2000). Attempting to capitalise on declining morale amongst the CGT's support base, FO fortified its grassroots branches at Renault sites, pushing 'membership services' to attract new supporters (Hancké, 1996). Similarly, the CFDT grew its base in the company in the 1980s and 1990s (Durand, 1996). Yet the CGT's support remained sizeable, encouraging other unions towards *ad-hoc* cooperation on representative bodies, orchestrating block votes to ensure seats remained outside the CGT's control (Cornudet, 1991). As at PSA, internal restructuring has produced the most meaningful change in union composition: the rise of the CFE-CGC.

Evidence Sources

Evidence for the cases is derived from fieldwork undertaken at company-level and at 12 assembly and powertrain plants over several years, examining a total 60 local union branches across seven unions (see Table 1, for case study characteristics and Table 2 for an overview of union representativeness).

TABLE 1

TABLE 2

Three sources were used in the fieldwork. First, documentation on negotiations provided by sector, company and plant union branches. Over 1,700 documents were collected, including union *tracts* (circulars) and workplace union publications. Documentation spanned the period 2008-2015, providing background and aftermath to the agreements. Media sources were consulted to gather contextual information. Second, evidence is sourced from semi-structured interviews with 46 sectoral, company and plant delegates from the unions studied; these were purposively targeted to ensure a sufficient number of actors with relevant institutional positions and knowledge were represented. Third, observation of union activities during and after the agreements included attendance at industrial strikes, public protests, national, regional and plant individual union meetings and post-works council inter-union meetings and exchanges. Triangulation across various sources and different unions on the same issues supported the generation of a reliable account. Evidence was analysed via 'open coding' through cross-comparisons of 'methods of agreement' and 'methods of difference', whereby the former considered what was common across the fieldwork, whilst the latter focused on evidence lacking common features and outcomes (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

5. The Case Studies

The case studies are presented sequentially, focusing within each company on unions' responses to the competitiveness agreements and their associated inter-union relations.

PSA

Union Responses

Plagued by overcapacity, several years of financial losses and the 2013 closure of Aulnay's assembly plant, the 2008 crisis and aftermath severely affected PSA. In 2011, an executive document, the 'Varin Plan[7]', detailed intentions to close Aulnay and potentially Sevelnord and Rennes, relocating production to a "*choice of low-cost countries (Turkey, Morocco, or Eastern Europe)*" (excerpt from Varin Plan). Disclosure prompted national political crisis[8], although the CFDT, CFE-CGC, CGT and FO's calls for state intervention to save Aulnay, as it had done in Renault Sandouville in 2008, proved fruitless; an outcome in part reflecting the differences in historical state intervention between the two companies.Two divergent approaches then emerged across the unions. Cognisant of the trauma of Aulnay's closure and the need for further competitiveness-enhancing measures, the first response pursued a damage-limitation strategy, exchanging concessions for appropriate *quid pro quos* on job guarantees and site viability. This approach was pursued by CFE-CGC, CFDT, CFTC, FO and GSEA PSA local unions, commanding approximately 75% representativeness in aggregate (a share holding constant over the course of the study and three electoral periods considered). The response of this group of unions to employer competitiveness demands is captured by a GSEA-PSA delegate:

> *We have this problem of high labour costs, high contributions and restrictive legislation. So if employees' demands put forward by trade unions become too high, an employer, who isn't a philanthropist, could go to a place where labour costs are cheaper, contributions aren't as high, regulation isn't as restrictive, and trade unions are less demanding.*
>
> GSEA-PSA Delegate Interview

[7] Named after PSA's CEO Philippe Varin

[8] See, for example, Le Figaro (2012) *Le gouvernement sonné par le plan social de PSA*, Available : http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2012/07/12/01002-20120712ARTFIG00630-le-gouvernement-sonne-par-le-plan-social-de-psa.php

The second response is exhibited by the CGT. The CGT retains around a quarter of the representativeness share at the start of the fieldwork which then dropped to under a fifth in the years after the competitiveness agreement. The CGT advanced an 'alternative production strategy' involving non-risk plants subsidising at-risk plants by volume sharing;, government intervention to stabilise sites and unwillingness to enter cost-cutting competitiveness negotiations regarded as unsustainable:

> *For the CGT, there is no question of committing to a contract where employees in France would work under Spanish conditions, the Spanish under Slovakian conditions, the Slovaks under Turkish conditions, and the Turks under Chinese conditions.*
>
> CGT-PSA Delegate Interview

These divergent responses in union action continued when PSA instigated negotiations on a competitiveness agreement in 2013, proposing, *inter alia,* a pay freeze for 2014 and pay moderations in 2015 and 2016. The CGT called for repeat mobilisations in opposition to the proposals. Initial CGT strike calls drew reasonable support, with approximately 4,000 workers across PSA joining the mobilisation. In contrast, the CFE-CGC, CFDT, CFTC and FO, GSEA rejected this strategy, preferring to negotiate job guarantees in exchange for concessions. Such guarantees were not forthcoming. PSA resisted offering a 'no redundancy' job guarantees, instead offering to maintain volumes at 1,000,000 vehicles per year for the agreement's duration and provide a new model to each assembly plant. Plants producing fewer than 250,000 vehicles annually would lose one production line with necessary job losses. Considering the production volumes insufficient to maintain jobs, the CFDT withdrew from negotiations and joined the CGT in calling for two rounds of strike action across plants: such actions drew no more than the initial CGT-led strikes. In contrast, the CFTC, CGC-CFE, FO and GSEA ratified the proposals via internal consultation and member votes, maintaining an acceptable *quid pro quo* in enhanced early retirement terms and new volume guarantees. Signatory unionists nonetheless characterised their cooperation as being driven by "*management blackmail*" (FO-Sevelnord Delegate) because the offer was either ratification or further site closure:

> *If there were no signatures at all, management can make proposals but they won't be able to apply the measures. But we can't stop the CEO from saying 'if I don't make the factories competitive like I want, I will go and produce my cars somewhere else".*
>
> FO-PSA Delegate Interview

While the CGT continued to call for strike action after the agreement's ratification to demonstrate opposition, overall turnout was poor at just 500 workers; a development which led the CFDT to drop involvement in further mobilisations. Nonetheless, local plant branches of the CGT continued to mobilise during individual plant-level consultations on the agreement's implementation. However, this action was concluded after limited turnout; for example, just 15 and 30 strikers turned out at Poissy and Mulhouse respectively.

Company-level negotiations were sandwiched in between electoral cycles: a new round of elections was initiated across plants over several months in the aftermath of the agreement. Negotiating status became the central electoral campaign issue at plant-level, with signatory unions promoting their stance as one of "responsibility" and non-signatories championing the position that rival unions "betrayed" the workforce; however, the pattern of subsequent electoral results evidenced a reproduction of prior patterns. If campaigning on agreement stance was the principal way competitiveness concerns intruded upon the calculus of electoral considerations, a smaller number of cases evidenced individual unions avoiding agreement responsibilities for fear of electoral consequence. For example, when PSA management at the Sochaux plant attempted to divide annual leave across the year as the agreement required, CFTC and FO branches voted against the proposal despite ratifying it at company-level. This prevented a decision on annual leave being taken at the site before the elections. However, when the works council voted again on annual leave after the election, CFTC and FO delegates' then ratified the new distribution of working time; action unsurprisingly attacked as opportunistic by CGT-Sochaux:

> *Usually they make a big deal when agreements are signed, we believe that they didn't do so this time because they even know themselves that this is an*

unprecedented step backwards. It's been silence because they are aware that this obligatory division of annual leave is unpopular.

CGT-Sochaux Delegate Interview

Inter-Union Relations

Turning to inter-relations, the following patterns were observed. Prior to the agreement, the announcement of Aulnay's closure generated a cross-union company-level platform between the CFE-CGC, CFTC, FO and GSEA entitled 'Come Together to Save PSA'. However, this was confined to a handful of joint statements criticising the CGT's actions at Aulnay involving a prolonged and sometimes violent strike in opposition to closure. The CFDT remained independent of the platform, partly because of historically poor relations with other unions at PSA, and partly because of internal division over whether to support the CGT-Aulnay. In any case, the platform was not sustained beyond a few weeks, because, as one participant observed, "*each union works for itself*" (FO-PSA delegate interview). Nonetheless, the platform was partially revived, albeit informally, during competitiveness negotiations, with the CFE-CGC, CFTC, GSEA, FO, and to a lesser extent the CFDT, sharing information on respective negotiating positions. Although no joint statements were issued upon ratification, individual signatories publicly commended each other for these coordinated efforts on information share and joint review. For example:

We were only able to sign this agreement because we worked, along with the CFE-CGC, GSEA and FO, to improve management's proposals to limit the effects of this 'new social contract' as far as possible. This is the type of participatory and responsible trade unionism with which we align ourselves.'

CFTC-PSA tract

This theme of responsible unions acting in alignment at company-level was not sustained however. Subsequent annual pay agreements found each union acting individually with no information share, joint review or coordination. However, at plant-level and as indicated above, signatory unions in Mulhouse, Sochaux and Rennes did utilise pre-existing electoral pacts to promote their 'responsibility' in signing the agreement in contrast to the 'grandstanding' of non-signatories. For example:

> *Why vote for the Rennes Alliance for the CE?... Because we do not regret signing the agreement which saved the site… Because we are participative and realistic, and don't try to make you believe in Father Christmas.*
>
> CFE-CGC, CFTC, FO, GSEA-Rennes tract

However, these positive espousals of inter-union alignment were functions of historic plant-level electoral alliances, rather than necessarily shared views on the competitiveness agreement, and were designed to counter CGT influence where the latter held considerable representativeness. Indeed, positive inter-relations among signatories were entirely contradicted by patterns at other PSA sites where one signatory union dominated representativeness and could thus act autonomously. In these cases, inter-signatory relations were rivalrous and hostile. For example, signatories at Poissy regularly issued attacks on one another during elections; the CFE-CGC criticised FO for only signing agreements "*when elections are over*" (CFE-CGC-Poissy tract), while FO attacked the CFTC for "*copying*" their negotiating positions to poach FO voters (FO-Poissy tract).

In terms of non-signatories, shared CFDT and CGT opposition to the agreement did not result in coordination post-ratification. Limited strike turnout encouraged CFDT delegates to end mobilization and any cooperation with the CGT on this matter. CFDT-PSA advised local branches to campaign in subsequent elections on a "*Third Way*" between the "*unions [who] betrayed employees through this ridiculous agreement*", and the CGT "*which is systematically against everything*" (CFDT-PSA Delegate Interview). Despite shared non-signatory status and an antipathy towards what they regard as the "house union" signatories in PSA, the CFDT and CGT attribute their inability to sustain coordinated joint action to differences in their orientations:

> *The CGT is a confrontational union…they say 'I saw that the boss was bad, you are all victims, we have to rebel, we have to strike every week'…They are always the same, so it's not a constructive union.*
>
> CFDT-PSA Delegate Interview

> *Every time a decision is made, 99.8 per cent of the time, the CFDT follow the [FO, CFTC and CFE-CGC].*
>
> CGT-PSA Delegate Interview

While the CGT attempted to obstruct the agreement's implementation via its activists on plant works councils, the CFDT withheld any support for this strategy. As a result, delegates from signatory unions could easily outmanoeuvre CGT oppositionary motions to agreement implementation at plant-level, effectively sidelining the militants' obstructionist strategy.

Renault

Union Responses

How did Renault unions respond to the competitiveness negotiations at company-level? The CFDT, CFE-CGC and FO at company-level, commanding 65% representativeness willingly entered talks, but countered that the agreement hinged on volume commitments to guarantee jobs. In contrast, the CGT, commanding a fifth of representativeness shares, participated in the first round of talks before withdrawing when Renault proposed forced redeployment, increased working time and 7,500 job losses through natural attrition and early retirement. The CGT's initial strategy, alongside that of the CFDT, was to approach negotiations to discuss, *inter alia,* expanding research and development in France and the potential for ergonomic job redesign. Such issues drew little traction from Renault negotiators, and talks quickly became overwhelmed by discussions on terms and conditions. Consequently, the CGT argued the agreement was a "*social regression not to be supported*" (*CGT-Renault Delegate Interview*), withdrawing to pursue company-wide strikes to encourage government intervention to moderate Renault's proposals. Other unions deemed mobilization "*premature*" (FO-Renault Delegate Interview). The CGT calls for strikes proved limited, despite the participation of the non-representative SUD at plant-level. Strikes commanded an average turnout of between 10 and 30 strikers per plants studied.

For those unions committing to talks, negotiations' stuttered over Renault's proposals on forced redeployment and unwillingness to guarantee volumes. Making little headway in negotiations, Renault threatened to close two plants if no agreement was reached. Negotiations collapsed as the CFDT, CFE-CGC and FO refused to participate under

conditions of "*intimidation*" (CFDT-Renault Delegate interview) and "*blackmail*" (CFE-CGC Renault tract). As a FO-Renault Delegate explained:

> *We were in the middle of PSA's Aulnay closure, so we didn't take Renault's threat lightly. However, we drew two red lines. First, to refuse the obligatory nature of mobility, which could lead to employees being made redundant if they refused. Next, because sites are under-utilised, we demanded firm and written commitments on volumes, because just talking about the sustainability of the sites left Renault the possibility to delocalise jobs.*
>
> FO-Renault Delegate Interview

The CGT again called for strike action which was then supported by the CFDT and FO who viewed it as a means of signalling the proposal's unacceptability to the employer, and calculating that government intervention was likely (hitherto, the state stood aloof from negotiations). The joint strike call mobilised 1,700 Renault workers in one-day action; although the CFE-CGC refused to participate, arguing that long-term site viability would be served by competitiveness improvements than "*politician's preferences*" (CFE-CGC-Renault Delegate Interview). Union ambitions for the mobilisations had the desired effect, prompting state ministers to intervene to chastise Renault for using *de facto* compulsory redundancy to improve competitiveness. Renault conceded, dropping the policy of forced redeployment and committing to produce 710,000 vehicles per year until 2016.

The CFDT, CFE-CGC and FO returned to the negotiations, ultimately voting to ratify the agreement soon after. In the case of FO however, ratification proved contentious. During negotiations, FO-Renault delegates worked closely with their regional and sectoral counterparts in FO-Métaux. This was reported by FO delegates as partly out of fear that their support for a competitiveness agreement at Renault would be criticised by other FO plant-level branches thereby allowing central delegates to lay responsibility with the sectoral officers. However, some plant-level FO delegates perceived that FO-Métaux was too involved and as too compliant in conceding to Renault's terms, while also arguing that FO-Renault support for the agreement contradicted the union's national policy (see p.5 above). However, FO-Métaux countered the deal was acceptable given it did not lower wages or

maintain compulsory mobility. Upon FO's ratification of the agreement, the FO-Cléon publicly attacked the company-level signatories and FO-Métaux. Issuing what it styled an "*apology*", FO-Cléon criticised the negotiators for "*betraying*" the workforce (FO-Cléon tract, 2013). FO-Cléon disbanded on site, with its activists establishing a new *Union nationale des syndicats autonomes* (UNSA) branch. FO-Sandouville, voting against ratification, also issued a tract to employees arguing that it did not agree with the deal, but that it would "*respect the choice of the central union*" (FO-Sandouville tract 2013). At Renault Flins, a sizeable number of FO delegates left the union upon ratification to create a new UNSA branch. FO subsequently lost close to 20 percent in the next elections at Flins. FO-Batilly issued an anti-agreement tract, claiming the company-level FO did not listen to its criticisms during the negotiations. The branch subsequently disbanded at the site. In this regard *intra*-union discord over the union's response to competitiveness negotiations reverberated onto the union's institutional representativeness, although it has not subsequently altered FO policy at company-level.

The CGT central delegates maintained that signatory unions had "*given up on the strike movement and believe management threats too readily*" (CGT-Renault tract); while claiming that CFDT and FO only participated in strike action as a form of posturing before the workforce:

> *It's the same story when you read their union propaganda and when we interact with their delegates during central negotiations. On the employee side, just to calm them down, we read that they will not sign 'unless'... then we hear them say to senior management that they will most likely sign.*
>
> CGT-Le Mans Delegate

With agreement ratification at company-level weakening a strategy based on mobilisation, the CGT-Renault delegates encouraged local branches to obstruct transposition of the agreement at plant-level through their influence on works councils. The sectoral CGT federation (CGT-FTM, *CGT-Fédération des travailleurs de la métallurgie*) also initiated a legal appeal to the *Tribunal de grande instance de Nanterre* on CGT-Renault's behalf over

the implementation of the agreement. Both strategies proved unsuccessful however (see below).

Inter-Union Relations

Turning to inter-relations, the following patterns were observed. Prior to the agreement, the 2008 automotive crisis engendered novel forms of company-level inter-union cooperation at Renault; albeit rarely enduring beyond a few weeks. Crisis-induced wage austerity resulted in the first all-union *Renault Alliance* forming in 2010 to present common pay demands. This collapsed within three months due to divisions on bargaining positions, particularly between the CGT and others. Did ensuing competitiveness negotiations counter this fragmentation? The CFDT, CFE-CGC and FO liaised informally, sharing their views on negotiation progress. Meanwhile, CGT-Renault remained isolated. Initially, it had attempted to cultivate closer relations with the CFDT during the early phase of negotiations: of the three other unions, the CGT delegates held relatively amicable relations with the CFDT during the short-lived *Alliance*. Indeed, in an internal memo to its local union branches at Renault, the CFDT-Renault praised the CGT's presentation in one of the early negotiation sessions, detailing a convergence of views on the need for 'employee-orientated' job design and quality rather than cost-focused production. However, the CGT's unwillingness to countenance concessions or participate in negotiations made inter-union exchanges difficult and relations with the CFDT quickly deteriorated: during the negotiations, the CFDT would publicly state that it "*forcefully condemned the CGT's demagogic attitude*" in resorting to mobilisations (*CFDT-Renault tract, 2013*); while FO indicated that "*it is better to bet on the future than to condemn it with the CGT's irresponsible attitude*' (*FO-Renault Delegate interview*) and the CFE-CGC argued "*certain people still think that a negotiation cannot be done without blockading factories or protesting on the street" (CFE-CGC delegate interview)*. Despite shared signatory status however, relations between the CFE-CGC, CFDT and FO did not move beyond informal information share. Post-agreement, unions retained their autonomous positions in annual pay talks.

Plant-level inter-union relations during this period also reflected an immunity from greater coordination in response to competitiveness negotiations. What coordination did exist among signatory unions at plant-level was confined to prior electoral pacts between CFE-CGC and either the CFDT or FO to circumvent the CGT's influence. These occurred at Sandouville, Douai and Le Mans with the explicit purpose "*to be able to have the most CE positions compared to the CGT*" (CFE-CGC-Sandouville delegate). Where both the CFDT and FO were present at sites, they tended to adversarial relations however. In the elections immediately following the agreement, both unions sought to attract votes away from each other by claiming the other made no meaningful contribution to competitiveness negotiations, for example:

> *In contrast to FO, from the start the CFDT took full responsibility for the risk to employees by putting forward a bargaining agenda. All the same, we have to give FO credit for its main characteristic: being the champions of hypocrisy.*
>
> CFDT-Flins tract

In response, FO-Flins reproached the CFDT for *"mak[ing] it out like it made all the progress on the proposed agreement by itself"* (FO-Flins tract). In some circumstances, electoral rivalry also produced hostility with the CFE-CGC, when both the CFDT and FO attempted to attract votes from the second and third electoral colleges of workers (technicians and managers). As this is the electoral college upon which the CFE-CGC organises, hostility erupts over 'poaching' supporters.

In terms of plant-level unions opposed to the competitiveness agreements, CGT and SUD-Renault presented the relevant case. After the agreement's ratification, plant-level CGT branches and SUD jointly pursued strike action to obstruct its transposition. One CGT delegate described this CGT-SUD liaison as promising:

> *We talk, we manage to get along [with SUD]. In the future we'll be able to work together. That's the objective. At Cléon, like elsewhere, we've always been the CGT alone against everyone, but if we can have allies to change management's decisions, of course we'll do it.*
>
> CGT-Cléon Delegate Interview

However, the results of such strike action were limited: worker numbers involved were generally small and largely confined to the CGT's main strongholds at the time, with 100 participating at Sandouville, and 80 participating at Cléon. Smaller numbers (between 10 and 40) were involved at the other sites studied. The CGT and SUD also jointly pursued the aforementioned legal challenges, claiming the deal derogated from plant working time agreements signed in 1999, which could not be overridden unless formally repealed. This case was eventually dismissed by the courts and despite cooperating on the matter, competition for similarly-minded voters fostered mutual hostility between the CGT and SUD at election time. In the electoral round some 12 months' post-agreement, both CGT and SUD accused one another of spreading false rumours of internal divisions to weaken electoral credibility. At Douai, the SUD issued a public tract attacking the CGT's "*one goal of diminishing SUD's electorate*" at the site (SUD-Douai tract). Thus, the two unions' shared repertoires of action disintegrated when institutional security was at play.

6. Discussion

This paper set out to consider how union responses to competitiveness bargaining are developing under the new representativeness rules. The literature review observed that some scholarship points towards micro-corporatism in responding to competitiveness bargaining (p.7), while other accounts raise the possibility for a continued adversarialism, drawing on long-standing traditions of mobilisation with the potential to challenge employers' narratives (p. 7-8). The review suggested that, aside from uncertainty over which narrative has most analytical purchase under conditions of union multiplicity, responses are likely complicated given the reformed representative rules. Responses to competitiveness bargaining also raised a question over the consequences for inter-union relations: exposed to employer competitiveness demands at local-level, might different unions overcome long-standing rivalries to coordinate common responses? Again, the representativeness reform was assessed to potentially complicate this dynamic (p. 8-10). This discussion considers

these questions based on the findings to derive some general conclusions. The section finishes with some general comments about the capacity of French unions to cope with pressures of globalisation via the mechanism of company-level competitiveness bargaining.

The majoritarian union response in both PSA and Renault points in the direction of micro-corporatism. Renault and PSA's high degree of capital mobility, evident via factory closure at home and investments abroad, offers them the ability to coercively compare plants, placing inevitable downward pressure on unit labour costs. Recognising their lack of structural power to hamper the auto firms' competitiveness agendas, unions are forced into compromises weighted towards the employers' position (see also Greer and Hauptmeier, 2016). In part, a “bias to cooperation” (Howell, 1992: 261) is a form of low-trust coercion stemming from employer threats of investment loss – which unions recognise as blackmail - but it is also a function of what Pernot (2018: 49) describes as due to unions who express “views more in line with those of employers (or with some social-liberal trends”. The electoral rise of the CFE-CGC in the representative structure exemplifies this; a union whose outlook on the need for competitiveness closely aligns to the employers’ given its ‘categorical’ membership base of higher-grade employees and middle managers. However, the other general unions, CFDT and FO, are also inclined to reference the self-defeating nature of militancy and the need for 'responsibility' in competitiveness bargaining. It is this position of compromise and concession, rather than the *syndicalisme de conquête* still practised by the CGT in the car plants, which is generating most gains in works council elections. Declining CGT representativeness and limited strike turnout indicates insufficient associational power to successfully contest employer competitiveness demands. If unions adopting compromise and concession is where the electorate's support lies, it is difficult to see what place militancy will retain in the car plants except on the margins and catering only to a declining constituency.

However, one cannot conclude that the possibilities for contestation under competitiveness bargaining are entirely negligible. Adversarialism punctuated the negotiations in both PSA and Renault, and unions moderated employers by mobilising to encourage state intervention. Unions can still respond to employers' competitiveness demands in a manner consistent with say Parson's (2013a) analytical emphasis and the country's historical tradition: moving issues into the public arena to attract government and public support. This strategy partially worked to unions' advantage in Renault, where cross-union mobilisation pushed the employer to remove references to obligatory redeployment. Greater severity of the crisis at PSA limited this possibility, although it is also possible that Renault's history as a nationalised company with a history of state interventionism may have made its unions more hopeful of government support than those at PSA, who have typically experienced a harsher managerial approach, as detailed in Section 4. In any case, oppositional strategies to attract state intervention may yield limited results in the long term, given government measures tend to be steered by employers' organisations which consistently lobby for lower labour costs (Pernot, 2018: 39).

Adversarialism in response to competitiveness bargaining is also partially sustained by the electoral-representative structure, but again only at the margins. Even those unions opting to support competitiveness agreements are alive to this potential electoral threat and must avoid being seen as too accommodating to employers' demands to maintain credibility. This is evident by signatory unions' tendencies to dedicate many of their public pronouncements to defending their position on competitiveness bargaining vis-à-vis the stance of non-signatories and temporarily sidestepping unpalatable agreement commitments in electoral periods. Furthermore, with multiple unions evidencing a concessionary bias, there is little expectation or need for unions like the CGT to sign competitiveness agreements, facilitating their oppositionary approach.

In terms of our second research concerns on inter-union relations under competitiveness bargaining, the findings indicate that overcoming traditional divisions and rivalry proved elusive, despite the commonality in individual responses among the majority of unions. Competitiveness crises did not herald significant departures from traditional divisions. Unions remain locked into their inherited identities, and so the weight of history casts a shadow over the contemporary immediacies of competitiveness bargaining. Negotiations on competitiveness did appear to elicit some cooperation among unions, but is transient and confined to shared reviews on negotiation progress, with no sustained attempts to formulate joint negotiation positions. While unions' public pronouncements are rhetorically positive about the benefits of inter-union cooperation in addressing competitiveness pressures, individual unions' priorities trump coordination.

The findings showed that inter-union differences are not merely a consequence of unions' respective inherited legacies, although these remain important: the representativeness rules accentuate inter-union difference and unions' prioritisation of their individual institutional security, thereby weakening the capacity of unions to jointly respond to competitiveness challenges. While the representativeness rules do create conditions in which some elementary inter-union coordination becomes necessary, this occurs where individual unions are too representationally weak to act independently, or to side-line the CGT. This is opportunistically motivated by representative circumstance rather a broader political vision for a coordinated labour movement responding to the challenges of globalization.

In summary, competitiveness bargaining, in the car industry at least, presents a situation where structurally weak unions, with fragmented and weak associational power, are locked into concessionary give-backs. However, those unions which are willing to ratify concessionary adjustments in competitiveness bargaining are also those which garner majoritarian support among the workforce. Within this pattern, occasional bouts of adversarialism persist, but on the margins and lacking major support. Unions remain unable

to overcome divisions in confronting competitiveness bargaining. This is in part because they retain allegiance to inherited organisational cultures, but also because of the electorally-based system of trade union representativeness. At best, the representativeness system is insufficient to encourage sustained coordination among unions in responding to competitiveness bargaining, but, at worst, electorally-based representativeness is an institutional barrier to it.

Finally, one might infer from this study more broadly some conclusions about the capacity of French unions to cope with globalisation via collective bargaining more generally. Collective bargaining works best where the two parties involved are approximately equal in strength or at least forced by circumstance to develop an ongoing relationship with each other. When one party has plausible options to exit and attractive options elsewhere, the relationship becomes unbalanced and the weaker, less mobile party must give up or revise expectations previously established in order to sustain the relationship and retain the attentions of the mobile partner. Unless enmeshed in a broader web of supportive political rules and economic structures that moderate inequalities between the parties and constrain the mobility of capital, then workplace collective bargaining under conditions of market liberalisation cannot offer unions sustainable respite from globalization (see also Silver, 2003). Even on their own terms, the competitiveness agreements do not deliver on union objectives. The combination of wage restraint, significant headcount reductions and working time extensions in the PSA and Renault agreements facilitated a decline in unit labour costs in both firms throughout their duration[9], seeing French automotive labour costs fall behind those of Germany, while gross value added per thousand employees (as one measure of productivity) rebounded (CCFA, 2018: 28; 30). Yet this has not helped to stabilize jobs in any sustainable fashion. Volume commitments are a poor measure of employment stabilization

[9] See Statistica (2017a) 'Effectifs totaux du groupe PSA Peugeot Citroën en France 2013-2017' https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/603739/effectifs-totaux-psa-peugeot-citroen-france/; Statistica (2017b) Renault:effectifs dans le monde par zone géographique 2017' https://fr.statista.com/statistiques/549407/nombre-employes-groupe-francais-renault-par-zone/

as the industry continually upgrades its labour saving potential and fails to replace natural wastage. More broadly, there is much to commend Pernot (2018) observation that an effective union response to the challenges confronting France's political economy would be one that transcends the confines of atomised collective bargaining at firm level to embrace and sustain a broader political vision on a sustainable economic structure. However, as he observes nationally, and we observe at company and plant-level, there is little sign that the French labour movement can lead such a project given it remains trapped by inherited identities and divisions.

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Appendix

Table 1 Case Characteristics

	Plant	

	type/numbers employed	Representative Unions at Company and Plant						
		CFDT	CFE-CGC	CFTC	CGT	FO	GSEA	SUD
		Company						
PSA	5 Assembly/5 Component/5 R&D sites (France) State share ownership taken in 2015: 13%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
		Plant						
Mulhouse	Assembly 7,500 employees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
Poissy	Assembly 5,800 employees			✓	✓	✓		
Rennes	Assembly 4,000 employees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Sevelnord	Assembly 2,400 employees	✓			✓	✓	✓	
Sochaux	Assembly 9,600 employees	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Trémery	Powertrain manufacture 5,000 employees	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓
		Company						
Renault	5 assembly/5 Component sites/2 R&D sites (France) State owned shares: 19% (increased from 15% in 2015)	✓	✓		✓	✓		
		Plant						
Batilly	Assembly 2,300 employees	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
Clēon	Powertrain manufacture 3,550 employees	✓	✓		✓			
Douai	Assembly 3,800 employees	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓
Flins	Assembly 2,190 employees	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Le Mans	Powertrain manufacture 2,380 employees	✓	✓		✓			
Sandouville	Assembly 1,770 employees		✓		✓	✓		

Table 2 Company-Level Union Representativeness%

	PSA							
	CFDT	**CFE-CGC**	**CFTC**	**CGT**	**FO**	**GSEA**	**SUD**	**UNSA**
2007	11	16	14	26	16	17	x	x
2011*	14	18	12	22	18	14	1	1
2015	15	20	12	19	19	12	1	2
	Renault							
2005	17	25	4	31	21		2	
2007	19	27	4	29	20		2	
2011	19	30	3	25	16		7	
2015	21	32	2	24	13		7	

*Plant-level representation figures available on request.