

Uneven development, labour regimes and
resistance in global production.

The case of Morocco's automotive industry.

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Labour and global production: mainstream GVC scholarship

- GVCs potentials for upgrading (scaling up from low to value added activities; Gereffi 2019), but **social upgrading** (improvement in working conditions and labour entitlement) **not automatic** (Barrientos et al. 2011)
- Single focus on inter-firm relations and **no systemic explanation for *endemic uneven development and social downgrading*** in contemporary capitalism (only contingent or institutional: lead firm's «market power» NB \neq *monopoly power*, financialization, market deregulation, consumer patterns in the global north)
- **Problem solving, «elite-centred»** (Selwyn 2013) and **«global-north» biased approach to labor advancements**: multiframework agreements, social dialogue, tripartite (state-union-employers) negotiations etc. More emphasis on NGOs and consumer-oriented campaigning than labour conflict (Palpacuer 2008, Barrientos et al. 2011).

Embedding global production and capitalism

- **GVCs as contemporary organization of capitalism** (Selwyn et al. 2025): system rooted in social relations of **labour exploitation** mediated by **competition, capital centralization** and **crisis**.
- **GVCs specificity as capitalist configuration:** combination of labour processes at different degrees of development to increase exploitation and accrue monopoly power through leveraging low wages (super-exploitation; Marini 2022) in the global periphery (unequal exchange), responding to long-term crisis tendencies (Smith 2016).
- **Uneven development-increased exploitation nexus:**
 - **Centralization of chains' control**=more competition among suppliers=**more exploitative pressures on suppliers**.
 - **GVCs=extraverted accumulation (Amin 1977)** in the global periphery//agriculture commodification=**reproduction of permanent and vast labour surpluses**

GVCs, class relations and labour regimes

- **GVCs** *are* processes of **multiscalar uneven development and labour fragmentation**, involving both **production, social reproduction and the institutional dimension** across core-periphery divides and more situated geographies (Huertgen 2022, Werner and Bair 2019)
- **State(s) agency key to structure labour regimes** securing surplus value extraction conditions for transnational capital in the global periphery;
 - my focus: **land dispossession policies, border criminalization, spatialized industrial strategies, labour precaritization and labour repression.**

Labour regime: «a set of social relations and institutions that *make* workers [...] and shape and construct exploitation at multiple scales and through different spheres across the “global economy”. Labour regimes are the invisible infrastructures that mobilize workers for factories, farms and offices, and that extend and intensify work. (Baglioni et al. 2022: 82)»

Labour and global production: what potential for labour resistance?

- **GVCs** increase fragmentation insofar as they **expand cooperation** by combining labour processes across borders and fostering **new working classes in formation**, particularly in the global periphery.
- **Kumar 2020: capital centralization** cascading to suppliers and **reduction of 'new' low cost locations** within GVC regionalization patterns poses some **limitations to spatial fix strategies=improvement of labour workplace power (Silver 2003)**.
- **Power Resource Approach (PRA) (Schmaltz 2018, Arnholtz and Resslerund 2024):** workers in global production have been able to obtain gains by leveraging **structural, associational, ideational and institutional power resources** (for a review of literature see Flecker 2024).

Labour and global production: workers' resistance and its limitations

- **Are stable and cumulative compromises possible in GVCs?** Risk of reformist bias. **Labour regimes** shapes patterns and outcomes of labour resistance, and also **crucially** adapt to class struggle.
- **Unions=Associational power.** Risk of **trade union fetishism (Atzeni 2021):**
 - lack of attention to **workers' self-organization** and to limitations of **unions** as institutionalized actors **bargaining the value of the labour power.**
- **Class conflict institutionalization=Institutional Power.**
 - Neglect of institutionalized bargaining's **role in stabilizing exploitation** and **incentivizing union bureaucratization (Hyman 1989, Darlington and Upchurch 2012)** – subordination of class formation to organizational and institutional gains (Gallas 2024, Nowak 2018)

Unions and Labour Regime Stabilization

- **Gap in the literature on labour regimes and global production:** unions mainly studied as irrelevant, or constrained, unless they are *directly* part of the labour regime itself (state-incorporated unions).
- Necessity to examine **state–union relations** and **spaces for sectional labour incorporation** which may reinforce **unions institutionalism** and concur in labour fragmentation (more than class formation). **Morocco in the automotive GVC interesting case to stress this point.**

Unions as Mass integrative apparatuses (Nowak 2021): popular organizations whose role is to sustain the broader social and political order *precisely* through the articulation of working-class demands, yet selectively and in forms compatible with the capitalist system in its concrete configurations (in this view **no strict analytical separation between independent and state-incorporated unions**).

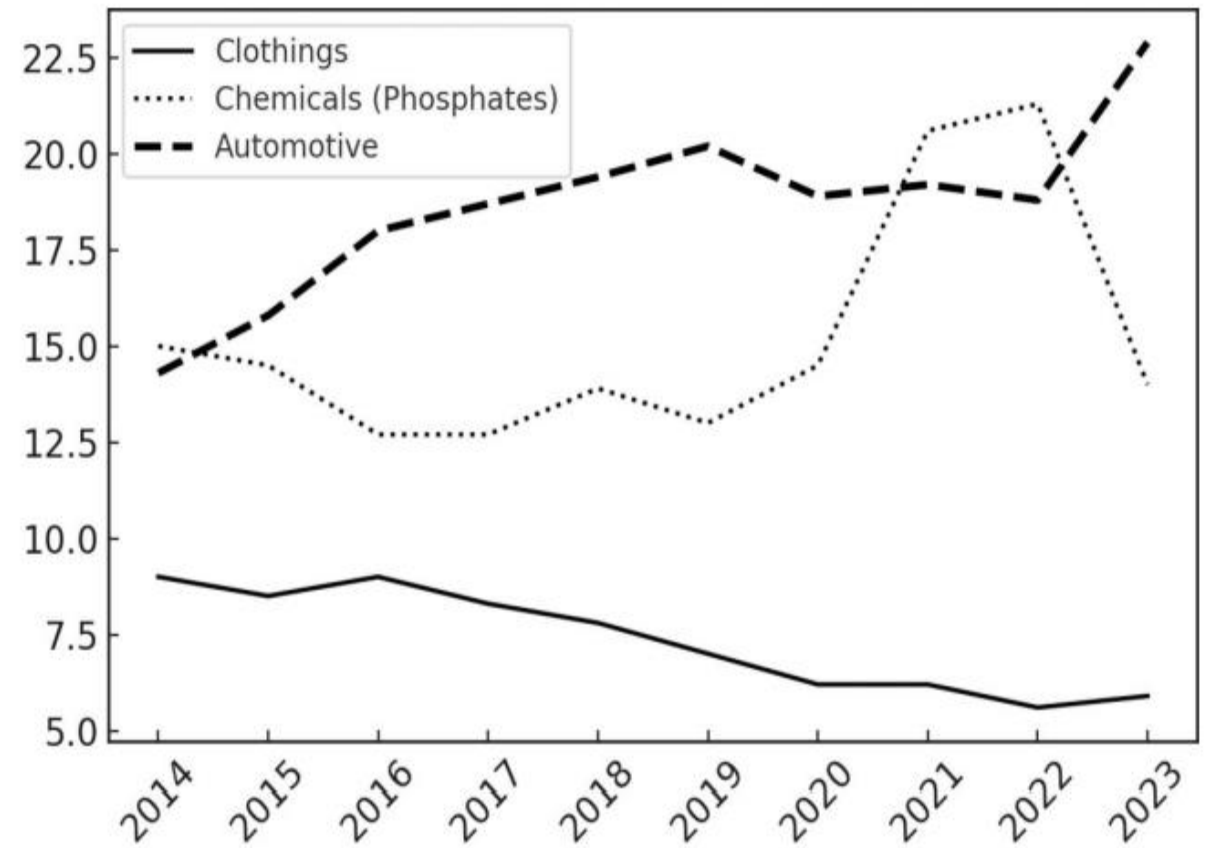
Morocco automotive integration: upgrading or uneven development?

- Late 2000s significant expansion of automotive FDI 2012 Renault and 2019 PSA (now Stellantis) investment in Tanger and Kenitra turning points (2023 Morocco surpassed half million cars assembled. Since 2026 Chinese EB FDI in Kenitra).
- Hyperspecialization in labour intensive electric parts, besides cars, still more visible in employment than in production data, and almost total control by core-headquartered TNCs.
- Elevated extraversion: 80% production for exports and lack of productive and employment spillovers



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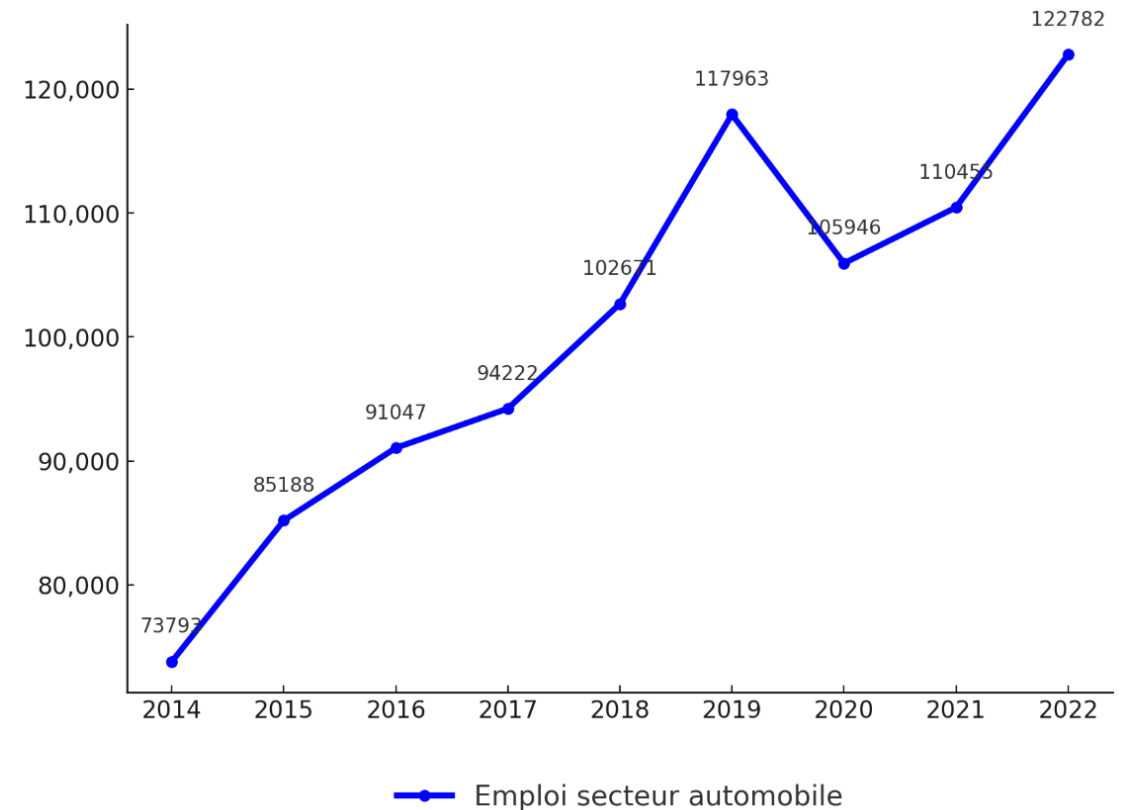
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Morocco's top exports (% on total). Author's elaboration from HCP

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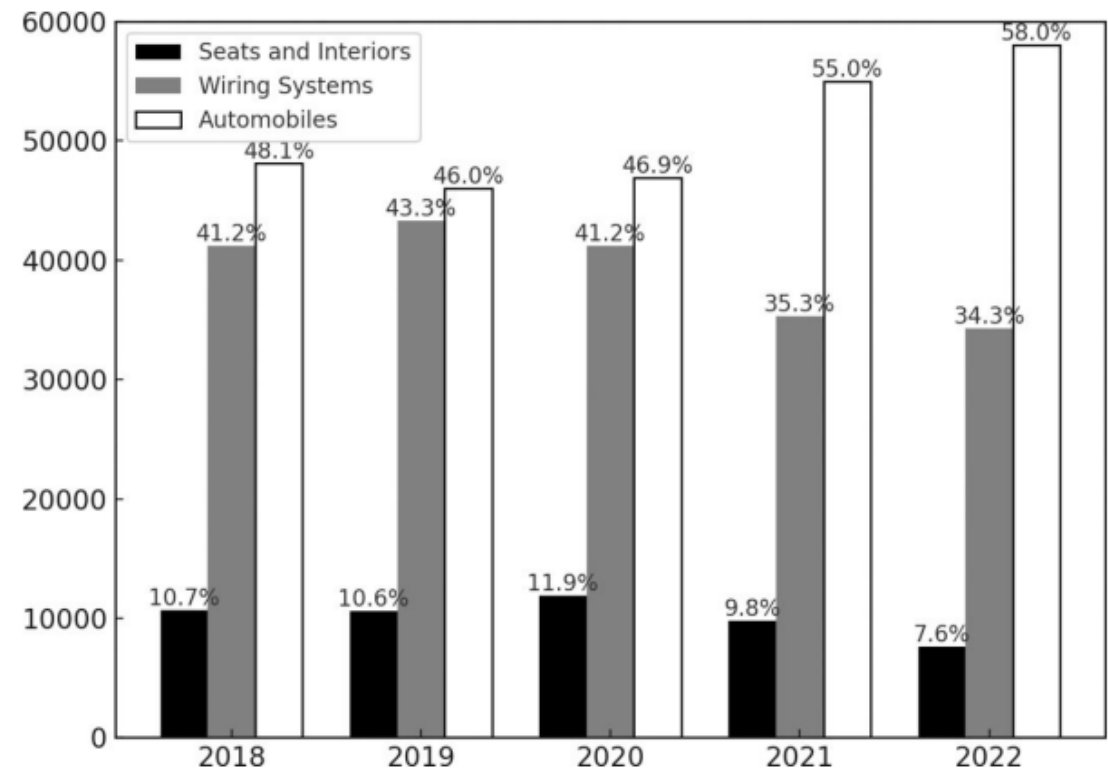
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Total employment in Morocco's automotive sector. Author's elaboration from HCP

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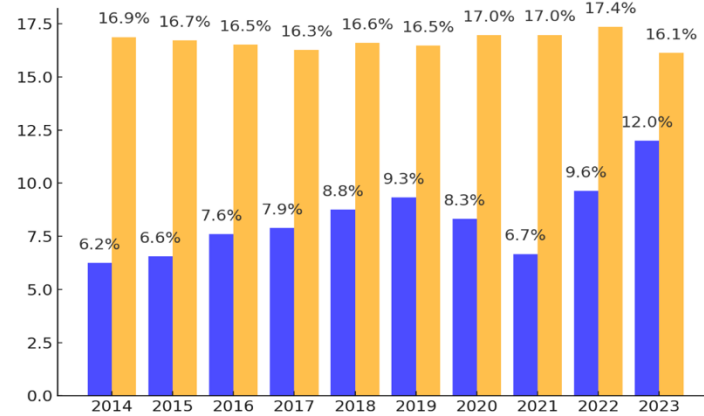
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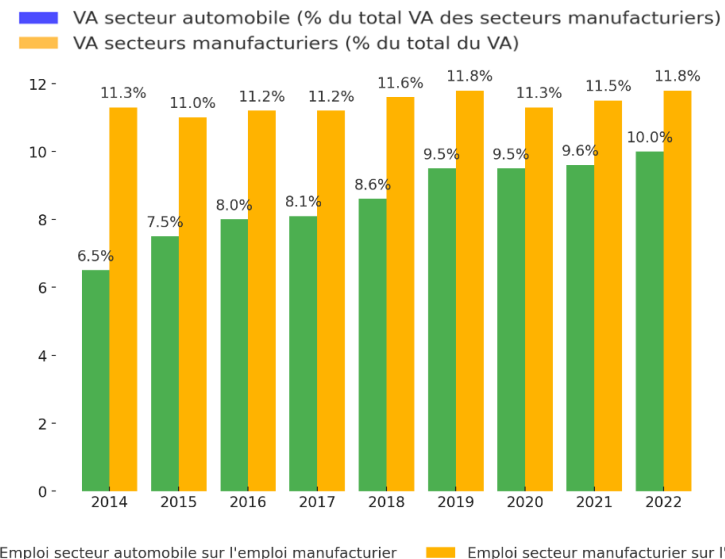
Decomposition of Morocco's automotive exports. Author's elaboration from HCP

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Share of manufacturing value added on GDP vs share of the automotive sector on manufacturing value added. Author's elaboration from HCP



Share of manufacturing employment on GDP vs share of the automotive sector on manufacturing employment. Author's elaboration from HCP

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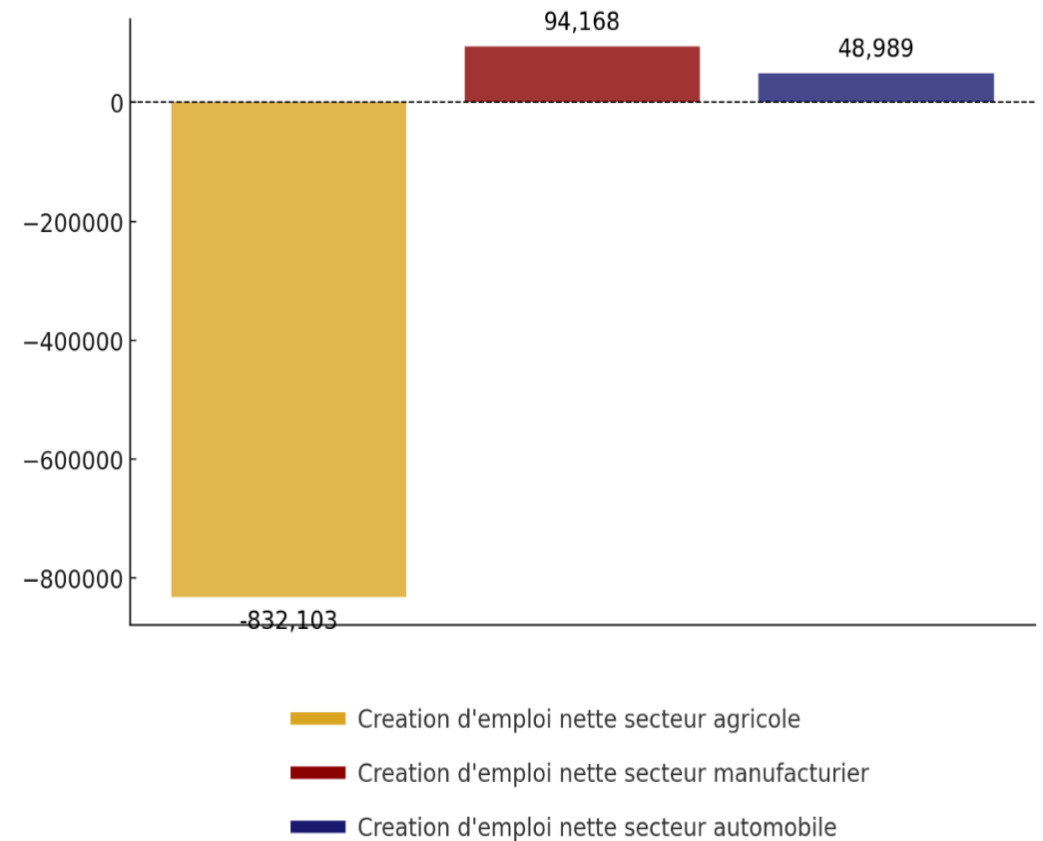
Table 1. companies employing more than 10,000 workers in Morocco's automotive sector, 2019.

Firm	Employment	Sub-sector	Nationality
Aptiv	20.000	Wiring systems	US
Sumitomo	20.000	Wiring systems	Japan
Leoni	20.000	Wiring systems	Germany
Lear	14.000	Wiring systems	US
Renault	11.660	Car manufacturing	France
Yazaki	11.000	Wiring systems	Japan

Source: Challenge (2019).

Key features of the labour regime

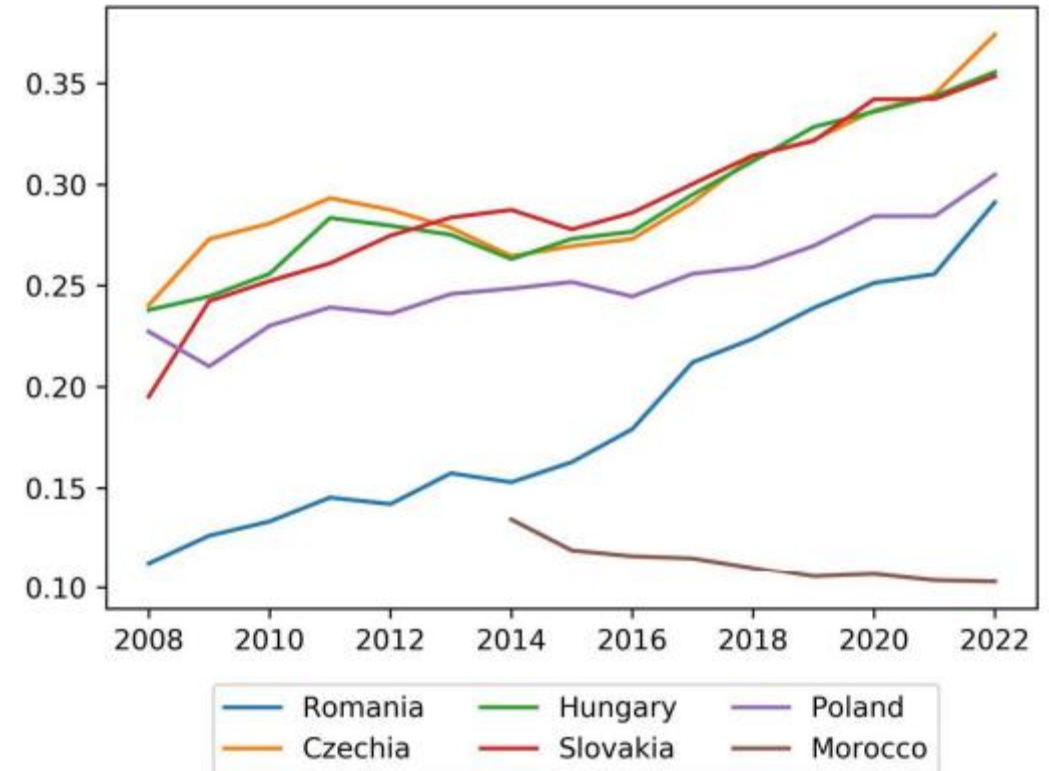
- Automotive-led unable to absorb rural job losses. Nevertheless it crucially benefit from it: 70% of the workforce in the Tanger Free Zone from rural and deprived areas.
- State policies of extensive leasing and privatization of state lands (Plan Maroc Vert) key to dispossession and expansion of rural, migrant and highly feminized labour surpluses, alongside industry uneven spatialization.
- Importance of border criminalization: Morocco's rise as automotive hub partly related to wage increases in CEE linked to wage increases after their entry in the Schengen area.



Job creation per sector in Morocco 2014-2023. Author's elaboration from HCP

Key features of the labour regime

- State programs to supply TNCs with highly precarious labour: ANAPEC internship contracts: 2 years below minimum wage no social assurance) NB minimum wage \neq living wage
- Strike criminalization (article 288 penal code) and constraints to union representation and collective bargaining (elevated thresholds for electing workplace representative). Coercive obstacles to unionization in Free Trade Zones
- Unions fragmented and weak but also to a degree «mass integrative»: institutionalist strategy privileging public sector employees underpinned by social dialogue arrangements with the state.



Wage as percentage of that in EU core-locations (Germany and France). Author's elaboration from EUROSTAT and HCP

Labour regime's articulation: Wiring Harnesses sub-segment

- Highly manual labour process (though differently from textile workspace dictated by assembly lines); relatively elevated competition due to regional network dispersion.
- Highly feminized and migrant workforce from rural origin, elevated use of precarious contracts, piecework pay and long overtimes, prevalence of non living wages.
- Systematic gender harassment and labour law violation, blacklisting practices against union activists in Free Trade Zones.



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January 2015, Tanger Automotive City: security guards harass a worker who attempted to create a union branch at ECI (a US wire harnesses TNC). The weeks before, dozen of workers who had attempted to create a union branch were fired and beat by the security guards.
February 2016, Tetouan: some temporary workers protest to regularize their temporary and ANAPEC contracts. The employer – Reydel a French plastic parts TNC - fires them.
June 2018: a muscular police intervention by the police attempts to break a sit-in launched by Delphi workers. The workers protested against the elimination of the collective agreement after the firm changed the name of its Moroccan affiliate.
January 2019, Tanger Free Zone: the whole UMT branch of Delphi is fired, as a response of several strikes and mobilizations occurred all along 2018. The same month, Sofia, a German TNC producing copper material, fired workers who tried to create a union branch.
February 2020, Tanger Free Zone: several union activists at APTIV (former Delphi), YAZAKI et SEBN are fired. Together with Delphi, these firms were at the forefront of a series of strikes to defend basic workers and union rights in 2018
January 2021, Atlantic Free Zone (Kenitra): a strike erupts PSA Stellantis. Hundreds of policemen encircle the factory to prevent that the strike spreads to the night shift. Strike leaders are harassed and many participants are fired.
April 2021, Tanger Free Zone: Jobelsa, a Spanish TNC producing seats dismisses 400 workers refusing to pay them the severance pay
April 2022, Berrechid (Casablanca province): a French wire harnesses TNC fired 4 union activists. A strike ensued asking basic workers' rights and the regularization of temporary contracts.
April 2023, Tanger automotive city: a US based wire harnesses TNC fires the whole union branch for having demanded the respect of basic labour rights, in particular stop to arbitrary career advancements and recognition of sickness leaves. Security guards evicted them from the factory.
June 2023, Tanger Free Zone: a group of workers planned to establish a union branch in a Swiss TNC producing connectors to deal with excessive overtime and derisory festivity bonuses. The firm fired them and evicted from the factory.

Table 11: major episodes of union right violation in the Moroccan automotive sector.

Sources: ITUC and author

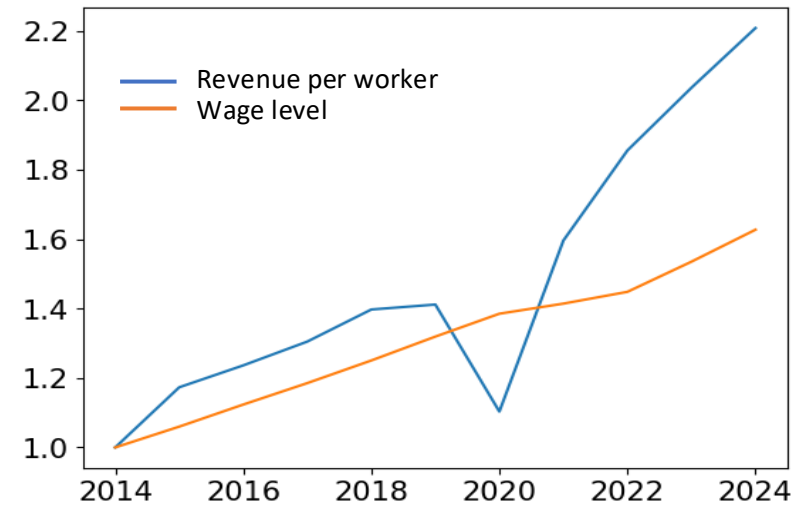
Labour regime's articulation: Renault Tanger

- Relatively capital intensive labour process; strategic workplace for the Moroccan economy and Renault herself (Dacia Sandero top sale car).
- Relatively more skilled and male workforce; mobilization cycle between 2013 and 2015 – date of the sign of a collective bargaining agreement: wage increases above productivity (NB Renault Tanger wages 40% lower than Romania)
- Over time growing precaritization and, particularly since, 2019 automation (interrelated trends). 20-30% of the workforce short term internship contracts.
- Union sectionalism and demobilization strategy.

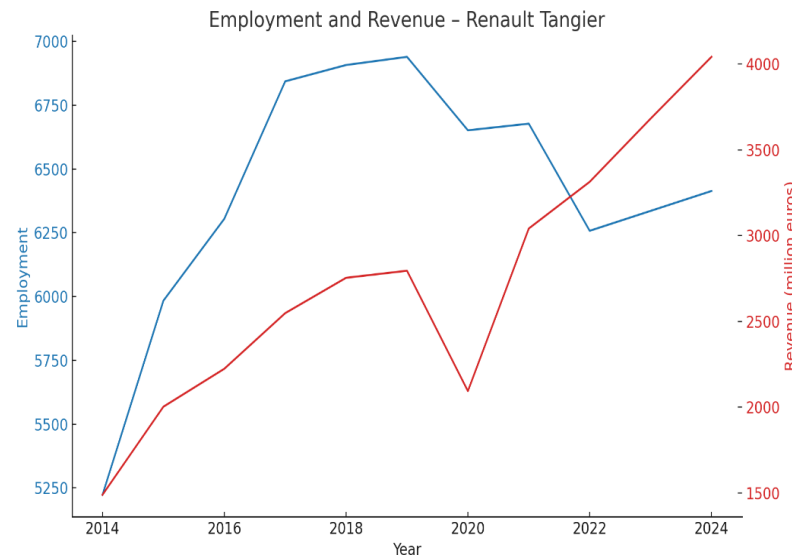


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- Union sectionalism and demobilization strategy. Boycott of self-organized strikes from precarious workers and acceptance of job losses (in exchange of retirement schemes).



**Renault Tanger
productivity vs. wage
2014=1
Author's elaboration from
Renault financial reports**



**Renault Tanger
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We respect the collective agreement in which strike is an option only in cases of injury, death of a workers, or attempts by the company to reverse workers' gains. In Romania, they have not yet accepted that Dacia is a private enterprise (#21⁶¹).

Some say we are with management and not with the workers. It is often difficult to explain to the workers that a strike could jeopardize investments and the existence of the social partnership itself (#21⁶²).

Interview to Renault union, Tanger

Labour regime's articulation: Stellantis Kenitra

- Relatively labour intensive; less strategic to PSA-Stellantis than Renault Tanger to Renault (at least during my fieldwork)
- Relatively more skilled and male workforce; but localization closer to agrarian surpluses (local and from most deprived regions of Morocco).
- Less spaces for bargaining. January 2021 wildcat and self-organized strike against bank hour system (overtime not paid) elevated precarity, non living wages and harassments. Afterwards: union recognition under but no collective agreement, despite the former's «social partnership» strategy.



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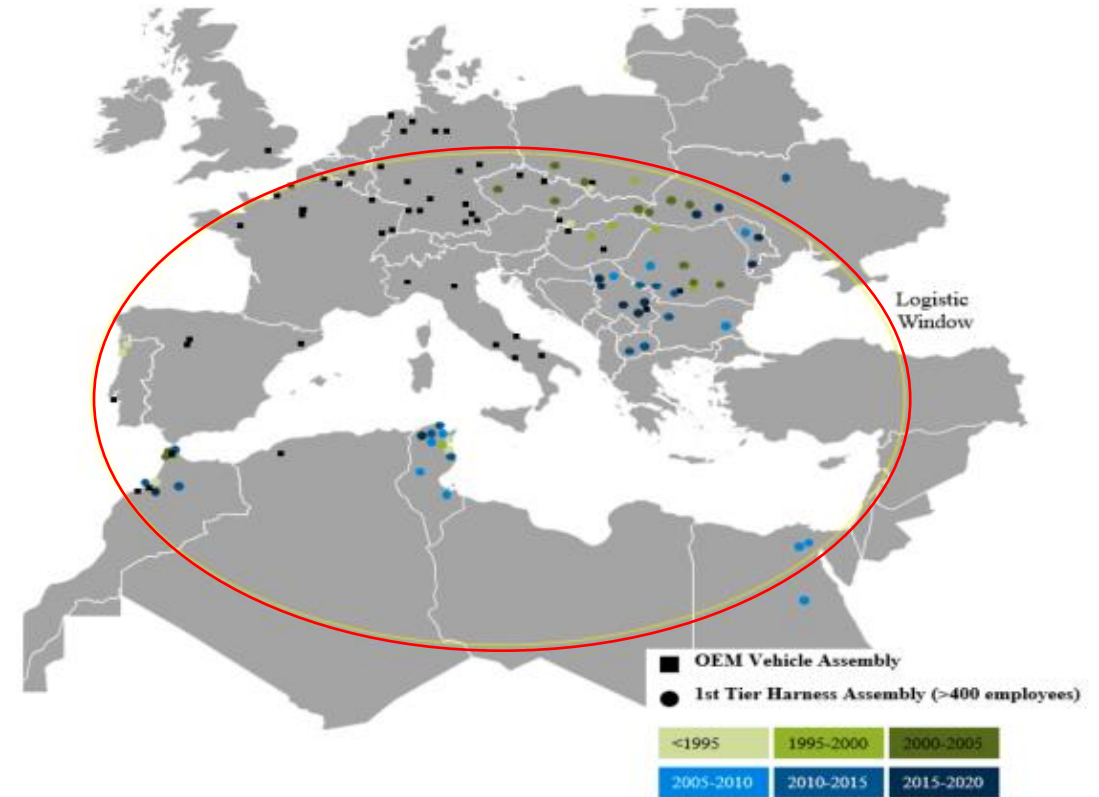
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Police deployment against 2021 PSA's wildcat strike
Source: Facebook groups

Unions and labour fragmentation along the supply chain

- Wiring harnesses workers: low labour market bargaining power and a relatively low, but not negligible, workplace power.
- 2018 key episode of self-organized strike across 7 facilities at Delphi against retreat of seniority increases. Immediate gains, but repression and lay off against strike leaders.
- Unions' focus on plant level bargain in the car assembly segment and lack of support to self-organization in the wire harnesses sub-branch reproduces labour fragmentation.



Wire harnesses «logistic window» (red circle).
Source: Azemeh et al. 2022

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the unions' approach is to say to workers: well, let's create a union branch, let's go to the authorities and ask the boss to indict elections for union representatives. The problem is that most of the times, the bosses react by firing them! As a response, workers sometimes organize sit-ins, or file legal actions, but the unions do not really support them. For consequence, 90% of workers ask themselves: why should I form a union in my workplace? (#27¹)

Interview to a wiring harnesses worker, Tanger.

- Thanks