

Sacked South African Volkswagen workers appeal for international support

Our correspondent
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In his recent State of the Nation speech, South African President Thabo Mbeki attacked the 1,300 striking Volkswagen (VW) autoworkers. The strikers, employed at the company's factory in Uitenhage, near Port Elizabeth, were defending 13 democratically elected shop stewards who had been suspended from office by their union, the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). The union has collaborated throughout with VW management, who said they would sack the striking workers for refusing to attend work when instructed. Mbeki backed VW's action and said that the ANC government also would not be "held hostage by elements pursuing selfish and anti-social purposes".

The World Socialist Web Site has received material from the Uitenhage Crisis Committee (UCC) which represents the sacked VW workers, explaining the background to the sackings and calling on workers internationally to support their struggle against the NUMSA leadership.

UCC explain that a new layer of 13 militant shop stewards was elected at the VW plant in March 1999. NUMSA leaders immediately set about trying to remove them, including taking them to the Labour Court. The stewards were suspended when a 2,000-strong mass meeting voted not to attend a quarterly general meeting on January 17 after hearing that the company's director would not be present. The general meetings are events through which the VW management seeks to instil in the workforce the need to improve company performance. Workers asked that they be able to continue working, instead of attending the meeting, but management refused. It was at this poorly attended general meeting, with the 13 stewards also not present, that NUMSA officials, including union President Mtutuzeli Tom, voted to suspend the stewards.

The next day, the Sheriff of the Court and VW management presented the 13 with notice of their immediate suspension as shop stewards. On Thursday, January 20 workers gathered outside the factory gates in support of the stewards. Union officials refused to turn up to negotiate on behalf of the men, but held a meeting with VW management that evening and signed an agreement that the shop stewards were suspended. Disciplinary hearings were planned for Monday, January 24, when work should recommence and individual workers should sign a form committing themselves not to disobey management instructions. As most workers at the plant were now not working they only learnt of this agreement through the press.

The UCC's statement explains:

Over the weekend, a crisis committee was set up of delegates of various factories in Uitenhage to carry forward this struggle. The chairperson, Mxolisi Ndandani, was also chosen as the spokesperson. On Monday morning, January 24, he made a call for independent mediation, even if need be from the provincial government. No one came, even up to now. On that same day, the company illegally locked out the workers. At the same time, the NUMSA leadership issued a condemnation of their own locked-out members. They used workers' money to try and kick out democratically elected shop stewards, but when it came to opposing the illegal lockout, they sat by with arms folded. This shows the collusion of VWSA management with the NUMSA leadership. The press were biased and played up the story of a handful of 350 strikers and on Wednesday, 26.1.2000, during the lockout, the VWSA management suspended the 350 workers. It is clear that among these 350 names, the management had identified militant workers that have been a thorn in their flesh for some time.

By Friday, January 28, the NUMSA officials again made an agreement with the VW management that work would restart on the Monday, January 31, and that the disciplinary hearing for these 350 would start on that same day. The NUMSA officials even volunteered to represent these workers. By shifting focus to the defence of the 350, it was easier for the NUMSA officials to keep to their position that the 13 remained suspended. They were helped by the VWSA management, who from the start banned the shop stewards from calling meetings on the plant. When workers realised that the VWSA management were working hand in glove with the NUMSA leadership, this hardened their position and determination to stand together.

Although from Monday, January 31 some workers had gone back to work, for the whole week up to February 4 there was no production at the plant.

On Tuesday, February 1, at 3.27 p.m., COSATU issued a statement on behalf of one of the NUMSA officials who was leading the attack on the 13.

We quote it in full: “COSATU General Secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi will address a NUMSA General Meeting at Barks Madlakane Hall, Kwanobuhle Uitenhage this afternoon at 5PM. The meeting has been called by NUMSA to address the illegal strike at the Volkswagen plant in Uitenhage. Vavi will urge all NUMSA members to go back to work and distance themselves from agent provocateurs bent on disturbing production at the plant.”

This shows that even before the COSATU general secretary came to the Eastern Cape, before he even heard the information firsthand, his mind was made up.

This point emphasises the call by the Uitenhage workers crisis committee that the mediation has to be from an independent source in which they have confidence. We still make this call, as we have done since the very beginning.

The VWSA management position to give the workers an ultimatum to return by Thursday, February 3 or be dismissed shows to what extent they were prepared to go in order to support the NUMSA leadership's plan to get rid of the 13 shop stewards. The ultimatum was an attempt to divide workers and intimidate them into abandoning the 13 and whomever else refused to return without them. Indeed on Friday morning, 1,300 workers were dismissed and a further 300 are still on

suspension, also facing dismissal. The need for solidarity now is critical.

To all NUMSA members we say: don't allow the leadership to victimise the fighters at VWSA—today it is us, tomorrow it will be you! To all COSATU members, an injury to one is an injury to all! To the VW workers across the world, we together produce the wealth of the company—let us stand together—today it is us, tomorrow who knows who will be next? To all workers everywhere, we need your support now!

A working class united will never be defeated!

WM Ndandani

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