

Police clampdown on South African VW strikers

Our correspondent
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A systematic campaign of intimidation has been launched against striking Volkswagen (VW) auto workers. This follows South African President Thabo Mbeki's denunciation of their action as illegal. Out of some 3,000 on strike, 1,300 were sacked and the company is now recruiting a replacement workforce.

Armed riot police now patrol the streets of Uitenhage, where the VW plant is located, in a clampdown designed to intimidate the workers and impede their activities.

Following stories that the strikers were involved in petrol bombing the house of a worker who returned to work, 200 armed police have been deployed in the town. No evidence of the attack has been produced and the strikers say it was the work of security forces. Heavily armed soldiers have been stationed on the routes normally used by the strikers. The police routinely follow strikers and committee members, stop them without reason and question them. At 3 a.m. last Thursday, March 2 troops cordoned off a section of Kwanobuhle, home to many of the 6,000-strong workforce. Armed police then began a systematic house-to-house search that ended with two arrests—one for cannabis possession and one for failure to appear in court on an unspecified charge.

Since Mbeki's speech, the strikers themselves have been the victims of attacks. A man driving a black Polo pointed a gun at Uitenhage Crisis Committee Chairperson W.M. Ndandani. Members of the committee have been victimised and dismissed from their jobs. The local ANC-controlled council has denied access for the strikers to their normal meeting places.

This attack on democratic rights is in response to the campaign by many present and former VW employees for the reinstatement of the 1,300 dismissed workers

through go-slows, lunchtime pickets and petitions. VW's communications manager, Matt Gennrich, confirmed last week that the chairs of both VW International and VW South Africa had discussed the strike with President Mbeki at the World Economic Forum in Switzerland.



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