

Interview with a South African Volkswagen worker: "Working conditions are worse now than they were under the apartheid regime"

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Binisile Mzeku visited Germany at the end of March as part of a world-wide tour. Mzeku is one of 1,300 workers who have been fired by the Volkswagen works in Uitenhage, South Africa. Workers had gone on strike to protest the expulsion from the trade union of 13 factory representatives elected last year. The World Socialist Web Site has reported on the dispute. At solidarity meetings and press conferences in Cologne and Dortmund reporters from the WSWs had the opportunity to speak with the South African factory representative.

WSWS: What is the current situation with regard to the dispute at the VW works in Uitenhage?

Mzeku: Following VW's sacking of a third of the workforce, production at the factory has fallen to about 10 percent of the usual quota. Production has ceased in the paint shop and bodywork departments. Originally VW contemplated closing the works for two or three months in order to train strike-breakers. When this became public, workers who had returned to work decided not to teach and train the workers who had been newly recruited to replace the sacked ones. As a result, the factory management distanced itself from the proposal to close. They feared solidarity between the sacked and retained workers, as well as between VW workers and workers in the general vicinity.

WSWS: What has happened to the sacked workers?

Mzeku: We have now been without work for nearly two months. At the end of March a hearing of the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration should have taken place. Both sides were due to present their cases. However, the VW management rejected this proposal of the conciliation committee. Now we are due to meet on April 5.

WSWS: What was the real reason for the dispute?

Mzeku: In the first place it was a dispute inside the trade union itself. Our trade union NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) expelled 13 factory representatives from its ranks. We were able to put them in place of the old representatives in last year's elections, who had continually acceded to management demands. After massive protests on the part of VW workers those expelled were taken back but then declared suspended. The 13 stewards opposed the trade union leadership. They accused the leadership of increasingly distancing themselves from the union ranks and working together with management behind our backs. The NUMSA trade union secretaries had talks and concluded an

agreement on working practices with the VW management without listening to the opinions of the workers and local shop stewards.

WSWS: What was the content of the deal between the trade union and VW?

Mzeku: It involved a whole range of worsened conditions agreed, apparently, to increase the competitiveness of VW in South Africa. In this A4 deal, named after a new export model, a regular six-day week was once again introduced, breaks were cut by about half an hour and holiday corridors were introduced; in other words, one can no longer choose when one goes on holiday but has to take them at a certain time. Taken as a whole, working conditions are worse now than they were under the apartheid regime.

WSWS: Can you give concrete examples?

Mzeku: Of course. It is usual to receive double payment for the Sunday shift. Now, however, two hours of the Sunday shift from 22:00 to midnight are reckoned as normal working hours. In this way two hours' pay has been stolen.

Formerly it was usual that one left the workplace a quarter of an hour before finishing time in order to shower and change. Now this quarter of an hour has been cut in order to maintain production.

The A-4 deal with worsened working conditions previously only applied to the export production line. Now it applies for everyone.

Another change affects the Christmas holidays. In line with its significance in our culture, Christmas holidays previously began on December 11. Management demanded that the holidays begin on December 23 or 24. While discussions were being carried out the old representatives had already signed a deal corresponding to management demands. We learned about it from the newspaper.

WSWS: You spoke about support from the workers. Are there other groups who are supporting you?

Mzeku: No. Support in South Africa has only come from the communities, from people in the townships and from small trade unions that do not belong to an umbrella organisation. Shortly before my trip to Germany two shop stewards from Toyota in Pretoria and Durban came to the factory. They were sent by the workforce in order to find out what was going on.

We have heard nothing from the government and the organisations backing the government—the ANC, the trade union federation COSATU or the Communist Party. Many trade union

secretaries or CP functionaries are now ministers in national or local government. For them the trade unions were merely a springboard for their political careers.

Critics of the trade unions are either expelled or disciplined. The trade union representatives are even more dangerous than the companies themselves.

WSWS: What do you mean?

Mzeku: When the companies take action against the workers then they has to stick to specific rules—for example, regarding hearings, measures which do not apply to the trade unions.

In January it was the trade union, not the company, which obtained a legal writ in order to throw the opposition representatives out of their offices. The trade union then called a meeting of trade union members for January 17. At the same time, however, there was a meeting concerning loans for children's school uniforms. Because of the importance of this latter meeting and the fact that the trade unions had said nothing about the content of their own meeting the trade union meeting was attended by about only 50 people. Afterwards we learned that the chairman of the trade union had attended the meeting and that the suspension of our representatives had been confirmed. Then on January 20 our representatives had to vacate their offices.

WSWS: How many members does the NUMSA now have in VW?

Mzeku: Before the conflict there were 4,500 members, virtually the entire workforce. In the meantime a large part have left the union. Leaving the union was a precondition for them to be able to engage a lawyer.

WSWS: Has there been any reaction from the IG Metall (Germany's biggest industrial union)?

Mzeku: Up until now the IGM has refused to make any statement about the conflict. The chairman of the VW world trade union committee, the head of the *Betriebsrat* of all German VW-factories, Hans Uhl, came to South Africa for three days at the start of the conflict. However he did not call us but spoke instead to the VW management and asked them to organise a meeting with us. Of course, under such circumstances the meeting never happened. After three days and without speaking to us, Uhl flew back.

Letters from German colleagues to the trade union committee in Germany were not answered by the committee. Instead they were replied to by VW executive member Dr. Schuster!

WSWS: What measures have the sacked union representatives undertaken up until now?

Mzeku: At the beginning of March the workers at VW sent two delegates to Sao Paulo in Brazil to a meeting of the world trade union committee. However Uhl, head of the world committee and his assistant Volkert from Germany, refused to even include the theme of South Africa on the agenda, although a South African college belongs to the committee. Applications to discuss our dispute raised by Brazilian colleagues were rejected. There was, however, an informal meeting with Uhl. The two South African colleagues were not sure if they were speaking with a fellow colleague or a VW manager. There was no difference to be seen. This corresponds to my own experience. We had a discussion with Uhl in October of last year. After listening to him for a while I said

to him he should not waste our time. He spoke like an executive member of VW.

WSWS: Are you surprised at the reaction of the government?

Mzeku: Yes. With the end of apartheid and the fresh election of a new government, which had really been voted into power by us, we had big hopes that our situation would improve. Instead at VW and throughout South Africa we are confronted with intensified attacks from the side of the employers. The problem between us and the NUMSA leadership came about because the trade unions had undertaken nothing against these attacks and had even agreed worsening conditions for us. These problems had already begun in July last year. There was plenty of time for the ANC government to arbitrate. However it did not react at all. They informed themselves on the situation from just one side—that of the NUMSA.

Improvements which we had gradually won in the apartheid period were taken back. Wages and working conditions at VW are now worse than they were in the apartheid period.

WSWS: What has been the reaction of the Communist Party?

Mzeku: The CP, which sits in the government together with COSATU, has also not said a word. We expected a response but nothing came. I am personally very disappointed. The general secretary of the CP, Blade Nzimande, came to us last year. VW management did not want to let him into the works. The workers threatened a spontaneous strike and only then was he allowed in. It was just the same with the COSATU chairman. But that was before the election.

In South Africa there is an advertisement for a chocolate bar. Two friends sit together, one has a chocolate bar. In response to his friend's request for a piece the one with the chocolate replies: "Don't spoil our friendship!" That is how it is for us in South Africa. We have stepped over a line and can now see how erstwhile friends react.

WSWS: Would you like to say something to our international audience?

Mzeku: Yes. I want to say that international support is more important than ever for us. Everything is worsening in South Africa. Mass unemployment is growing. A few extra jobs are being created, for example, at VW but those employed are young and without families. For older workers it is becoming harder and harder to get a job. The younger workers must also, however, reckon with worsened conditions. It is not allowed for more than three to stand together, otherwise it is regarded as an illicit meeting. Three young workers have already been sacked by VW for this reason. Two workers in the leadership of the VW workers Solidarity Committee were also immediately sacked. They did not work for VW but for National Standards and Goodyear. The companies stick together. We workers have to do the same.



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