

Strike and occupation at Volkswagen works in Belgium

Helmut Arens**23 November 2006**

More than 5,000 workers at the Forest Volkswagen factory in Brussels have been on strike since last Friday. The workers also occupied parts of the factory at the start of the week in order to prevent finished cars from being transported out of the plant and to stop any dismantling of machines. On Wednesday morning the workers held a mass meeting at the main factory gate to decide on further action.

There has been speculation over the future of the Volkswagen factory in Brussels for many months and rumours of plans for job cuts were repeatedly dismissed by the company management in Wolfsburg, Germany. Then last Friday it was announced that VW management had to decide to shift the entire production of its Volkswagen Golf model from its Brussels factory back to Germany as part of a package of extensive cuts. The move was aimed at “optimizing” capacities by dividing production of the Golf model between the German works in Wolfsburg and Mosel in the state of Saxony.

On Wednesday a speaker for the company declared that the measure was the only way of standing up to the pressure of international competition. As a result, 4,000 of the total 5,400 workforce in Brussels are threatened with the loss of their jobs. Apart from the Golf model only relatively few of the smaller Volkswagen Polo are produced at the factory.

Volkswagen workers in Brussels reacted angrily to the announcement and on Friday night blocked the major road in the Brussels suburb of Vorst for several hours with burning barricades. It is expected that the protest actions will continue throughout this week. On Monday trade unions called for pickets to set up around the factory.

When a company representative tried to address and appease workers by holding out the prospect of

increasing production of the Polo model—which is currently produced in the Spanish town of Pamplona—workers reacted with disbelief and rejection. “They are trying to play off one workforce against the other,” one Belgian trade unionist told the press.

Although VW management is currently ruling out a full closure of the factory in Brussels, many workers are convinced that such a move is entirely possible.

The German industrial and engineering union IG Metall and the works council in VW’s main headquarters in Wolfsburg have played a particularly despicable role in these developments. The most important precondition for the decision by management to switch production of the Golf model from Belgium to Germany has been the extension of working hours—from 28.8 to 33 hours per week, without full wage compensation—agreed by the IG Metall for German Volkswagen workers. In exchange, VW management promised to increase production capacities in its German factories. The consequences of this deal are now being felt by workers in Belgium.

There can be no credence given to the claim made by works council chairman Bernd Osterloh, who is also chairman of the European company works councils, that the announcement over the future of the Brussels factory came to him as a complete surprise. Osterloh tried to justify himself in a press release, stating, “It was never the intention—and this was also discussed with the executive committee—to raise working times in west German factories at the expense of plants in other locations.” The aim was rather “to fairly distribute market chances and risks within the framework of our international work.” According to the *Financial Times Germany*, Belgian union representatives have accused the German trade union of betraying workers in other European plants.

The extent to which the works council in Wolfsburg has been literally bought off by Volkswagen management has become clear in the course of the past few months. In addition to his regular salary the former head of the works council, Klaus Volkert, received a bonus and an additional special bonus amounting to €693,000 per year—nearly €60,000 a month! Luxury trips were also organized for a number of members of the works council, including visits to brothels. Klaus Volkert was arrested in Germany a few days ago. According to press reports he is being held on charges of obstructing legal investigations into the payments made at Volkswagen.

It is clear from the arrogance displayed by company management that it is fully aware it has the works council in its pocket. Volkswagen executive Reinhard Jung stressed that the transfer of production to Germany would not mean an end to rationalization measures at German plants. Volkswagen, he said, must react to the enormous overcapacity that exists in Western Europe, where the automobile market has been largely saturated. “For this reason Volkswagen introduced an extensive restructuring program at its German works. An important component is the dismantling of up to 20,000 jobs in Germany, which has already largely taken place. Further optimizations are planned in Germany,” Jung stated.

Although workers are being affected at all VW plants, the European works council refuses to organize a common struggle and instead seeks to pit one plant or location against the other.

The anger of many workers is therefore directed not only against the Volkswagen management but also against the works council representatives. They have expressed their concern and outrage in a number of statements made to the Belgian media. Workers have described the catastrophic effects that the loss of so many jobs would have for a region already hard hit by unemployment. The bitter response from one worker was, “Nothing has happened since Friday. We do not see why we should not recommence work.”

On Tuesday, the Christian trade union CSC (Confédération of the Syndicats Chrétiens) posted a report on its web site headlined “Social disaster at VW in Forest,” which stated in part, “Labour costs had already been cut by 5.63 percent and were due to be further lowered by around 10.7 percent by July 1, 2007.

Thus the company cannot claim that labour costs were a reason (for the production cuts at the factory), the same applies to productivity and flexibility.”

Workers from a number of auto subsidiary firms such as Meritor, Johnsson Control, Alcoa, as well as Automotive Park have joined in the demonstrations in front of the VW factory gates. The loss of production of the Golf model threatens all of these companies with the loss of thousands of jobs.

During the course of the past 10 years 3,000 workers have been made redundant at Renault in Belgium, and during the same period General Motors (OPEL) in Antwerp cut back its staff by around 4,000 workers.

Social relations are currently very tense throughout Belgium. On Wednesday, 1,200 to 1,500 public service workers demonstrated outside the Treasury in Belgium. The workers—mainly from social service offices and hospitals—were demanding wage increases of €20. Most of them currently earn less than €1,000 per month.

The railway workers union SIC (Syndicat Indépendant pour Cheminots) is carrying out strike action at the main station in Antwerp. Two thirds of all trains have been hit by the strike since Monday. The railway workers are protesting against new working schedules, which the SNCB (Belgian Railways) is planning to introduce in the middle of December. The new schedules are bound up with worsened working conditions. It is quite possible that other depots will join the action in solidarity.

In addition, air traffic controllers and technicians struck yesterday for one hour in Liège and Charleroi (Wallonia), in order to protest against bad working conditions. Kraft Foods Belgium (1,700 workers) is seeking to cut its workforce by 93 jobs and shift production to France and Germany.

Against this background of broad social conflicts the Belgium government, Volkswagen management and the trade unions are doing everything they can to keep the strike at Volkswagen under control and prevent the dispute from erupting into a major social confrontation.



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