

Belgian Volkswagen factory occupied

“It is high time to wake up and become political”

Our reporters
25 November 2006

The Volkswagen Forest works in the west of Brussels has been occupied around the clock for the past week. Of the 5,800 employees at the factory, 4,000 are threatened with dismissal, following the decision by management to switch production of the Golf model to Germany.

An initial meeting between the works council and personnel director Jos Kayaerts proved fruitless. The company was prepared to make no concessions before the board meeting scheduled for December 15. Belgian prime minister Guy Verhofstaedt plans to meet with the Volkswagen executive at the beginning of December.

For a number of weeks, rumors had been circulating about the possible loss of thousands of jobs and the atmosphere among workers at the factory was very tense. Confirmation of the news finally came from a radio broadcast at 8 pm on Friday, November 17. The late shift responded by taking strike action. The nightshift followed suit two hours later.

Hans Spiliers, a long-time Volkswagen worker, spoke to *World Socialist Web Site* reporters on Thursday in front of the factory. “The radio report was the trigger, and workers reacted spontaneously. It was not the trade union that called the strike. Since then, the entire workforce has refused to recommence work. No more cars are being built, and we are ensuring that cars already assembled stay in the factory. The management disappeared from the plant and our people have taken control. That has been the situation since last weekend. Since then we have set up shifts of three to four hundred men picketing around the clock, and I think we have to prepare, for a long, long strike.”

The decision affects not just 4,000 Volkswagen workers (3,500 production workers and 500 other employees), but indirectly at least the same number employed in subsidiary suppliers, with many workers from the latter enterprises expressing their solidarity with the strike. Two subcontractors, Faurecia with 130 workers, and Decoma with 100 employees, have also been occupied.

The whole region has been hard hit by years of job destruction. Around 300 Volkswagen workers were formerly employed at Renault’s Vilvorde factory in the north of Brussels, which shut down recently. For these workers it is the second time they have confronted a factory closure within the

space of a few years.

Volkswagen Brussels is not only a modern and highly-productive enterprise. Its workforce is also highly organized and known for its militancy. Almost all the staff are represented by at least three trade unions active in the factory—the socialist FGTB (Fédération Générale de Travailleurs de Belgique), the liberal CGSLB (Centrale Générale de Syndicats Libéraux de Belgique) and the Christian CSC (Confédération de Syndicats Chrétiens).

Christian Henneuse and Jean Weemaels, two FGTB delegates at the factory, said: “This is a militant enterprise here and the workers have long been denounced as ‘economic terrorists’. In 1994 we struck for a month to demand the introduction of the 35-hour week.”

“Our factory is the only one which does not work under the ‘plus-minus’ work time system introduced by Volkswagen. This is a system that directly subordinates workers to the demands of the capitalist market. Because we did not agree to this work time system, they are now seeking to force it on us through legal measures.”

Both expressed the fear that Volkswagen plans to get rid of the well-organized workforce in order to recommence production at a later date with non-union workers working under much worse conditions. The same pattern of events took place at Ford in Genk a few years ago.

When asked about the role of the German IG Metall trade union, the two FGTB delegates reported on their meeting on Thursday with three representatives of IG Metall who visited the factory. The IG Metall representatives came from three different VW plants at Braunschweig, Kassel and Salzgitter. “These people told us that the workforces in Germany are also confronted with the threat of transfer of production, and had been forced to accept wage cuts and productivity increases.”

The IG Metall representatives had promised to inform their fellow workers in Germany and mobilize their rank and file. They pledged that they would never accept compulsory redundancies in Brussels. “The message from the IG Metall representatives was that in agreeing to their own contract they had demanded that it should not be at the expense of other factories in Europe. This was the first thing they told us.”

Henneuse and Weemaels also reported that the works council

was searching for ways to work out an acceptable social plan for the proposed redundancies, which means basically that the trade union side has accepted the destruction of 4,000 jobs. The works council has raised the specific demand that wages continue to be paid during the strike until December 15.

The Volkswagen executive is aggressively demanding the destruction of more jobs. Company representative Dr. Reinhard Jung stipulated the figure of 4,000 jobs to be axed. He even called for the complete closure of the Brussels factory.

The two delegates complained that: "The press has only printed interviews with workers who are prepared to give up their jobs for some sort of redundancy money. The papers try to demoralize people and present a spectacle of despairing workers. In fact, the workforce is very militant and ready for struggle."

This assessment was confirmed by workers in front of the factory gates. Following a factory meeting on Tuesday, at which they were officially informed about the planned job losses, workers chased company security guards and two policemen out of the building. The situation became even more tense when workers occupied a main street and police responded by assembling their own forces and water canons in a side-street.

Many of the workers explained why they are not prepared to give in.

Alain Luystermans has worked for VW in Brussels for 28 years. He told our reporters: "We have closed everything down. We can only change anything through our own solidarity. Today we are being hit. Tomorrow it could be someone else. Big business is pocketing the subsidies and goes wherever it can to make even more money. We have had enough. But the politicians are also responsible, here in Belgium and throughout Europe.

"Instead of creating a Europe for ordinary people, Europe is just there for big business. We have to create a future not only for us, but also for the next generation."

When asked about the European trade unions, he answered: "The current European trade unions are nothing more than puppets. There are doing nothing about social issues and that is a big problem.

"It is high time that everybody woke up and became political. It is never too late, but now is really the right time."

Referring to the war in Iraq, he continued: "That is a war on behalf the big business. Generations will suffer because of it. Ordinary people do not want this. This is also one reason I am standing here. I am standing here for them, not just for myself."

Ibisi Ramadam, an Arab worker who has worked on the production lines for five years, referred to the miserable state of the labor market: "The political situation is very bad for the workers at present, too many are unemployed. There is 12 percent unemployment in Belgium. Now there will be 4,000 more and they won't be able to find any other work. Many have families that they have to feed. At the moment, the trade

unions are very active, but I don't know if one can trust them. I have no idea how it will turn out. The problem is the capitalist system."

Jesu Manchego, an older Spanish worker who worked for nearly 30 years at VW, is now a pensioner. He commented: "Many Spanish workers, who formerly worked in the mines, came here when VW opened up the factory in 1972. It was a period of large-scale mine closures. I didn't work in mining myself, but my brother did. I began working directly at VW. Volkswagen had bought the plant in Brussels where the VW Beetle had formerly been produced.

"We were young then and had worked all over the place, and VW was better than working in the mines. Mining is inhumane. There are always accidents like the one this week in Poland. When they shift production of the Golf then it amounts to closing the factory. It cannot survive on what is left.

Eddy de Martelaere explained: "4,000 workers are affected here and there is no other work. We are here in order to defend our jobs. We can agree with many of the promises which have been made, but will they be kept to? There is a well-worked out system of production here, but even so, virtually the whole factory is being closed.

"This just plays into the hand of chauvinists such as the [Flemish nationalist party] Vlaams Belang. This is an extreme nationalist group, which I am utterly opposed to.

"Big business operates internationally. The capitalists play off one section of workers against another. As soon as the news of the redundancies in Brussels was announced, the share price for VW shot up."

An international trade union demonstration is scheduled for Brussels on December 2 against the destruction of jobs. The Brussels VW workers, together with workers from other subsidiary companies, plan to take part.



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