

20,000 march against closure of Volkswagen factory in Brussels

Our correspondents
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More than 20,000 workers marched through the centre of Brussels December 2 to protest the threatened closure of the Volkswagen factory in the suburb of Forest. Some 5,000 Volkswagen workers from the Forest plant took part in the protest, supported by relatives, workers from other industries, white-collar workers, young people and the unemployed. Numerous nationalities were represented on the march, with most of the demonstrators coming from Brussels and other surrounding cities.

Delegations from other Belgian companies, which are also threatened by job losses—i.e., Kraft Food—protested with their own banners against redundancies. Other banners bore large cartoons alluding to the sex scandal involving the German works council boss, Klaus Volkert. In his official capacity, Volkert received nearly 700,000 euros a year from the company plus expenses for his girlfriend in Brazil.

There were few political slogans on the protest. Posters and banners proclaimed “Solidarity for jobs” and the names of various trade unions. Workers from the factory assembled around a broken auto chassis bearing a coffin. Retirees from the company carried a poster with the message: “Retirees support you—with rage in our heart.”

While there was no mistaking the deeply felt anger and indignation on the part of demonstrators, the trade union organisers of the protest intended it as a boost to their credibility while permitting workers to let off steam harmlessly. The unions had called for an “international demonstration” and indicated that workers from Volkswagen factories across Europe would attend to protest the destruction of jobs and the transfer of production from one location to another. “We will not allow individual Volkswagen locations to be played off one against the other,” was the formulation used by Germany’s biggest industrial trade union, the IG Metall, in its appeal to attend the protest.

In fact, the deal struck by IG Metall for revised working times at the company’s main factory in Wolfsburg, Germany, was the most important precondition for the decision by company management to switch production of the company’s Golf model away from Brussels.

The trade unions also neglected to organise any real mobilisation, and just a few VW workers from other plants attended the Brussels protest. The “solidarity delegations” consisted mainly of union officials, who had been instructed by the bureaucracy to attend, and had travelled to Brussels at the last minute—usually in their own cars. Although the German Wolfsburg

factory has a total workforce of 50,000, only one coachload of trade union representatives and workers attended the demo.

The cynical character of the organisers’ attitude was made clear when five members of the IG Metall were heaved up onto the speaker’s podium to express their “international solidarity,” despite the fact that the union had made no real effort to mobilise VW workers throughout Europe to defend the jobs under threat in Brussels.

The general secretary of the Belgian trade union FGTB (*Fédération Générale du Travail de la Belgique*—General Labour Federation of Belgium), Anne Demelenne, was applauded when she declared: “Colleagues, we must now transform our rage and revolt into energy and determination. The fight is only beginning. It is a struggle for jobs.” In reality, such a claim is completely hypocritical, bearing in mind that the trade unions have already accepted the transfer of the Golf model from Brussels to German plants.

A proposal has been made to the Volkswagen Brussels plant, which would involve the possible production of an Audi model (A3) beginning next year and the model A1 in 2009—proposals that are by no means definite and that, if carried through, would have disastrous consequences for VW workers employed in other plants in Spain and Portugal. Meanwhile, the company is sticking rigidly to its plan of shifting Golf production to two German plants. Discussions are currently taking place for a retirement and part-time employment plan for around 1,000 workers at Forest, and another thousand will simply be sacked.

At the protest rally, the FGTB spokeswoman declared “We must save as many jobs as possible”—a formulation that makes clear that the trade unions reject any principled fight against redundancies. It goes without saying that the same trade unions have absolutely no prospects of a struggle to establish new jobs to resolve the problem of high levels of youth unemployment in Belgium.

A team from the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed copies of a leaflet (in French and German) calling for the building of defence committees that function independently from the official works councils and trade unions. The leaflet makes clear that a principled defence of all jobs at all locations is possible only on the basis of a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Many workers read the leaflet and expressed their interest in the demand for international defence committees independent of the bureaucracy. At the same time, they had many questions regarding how such committees could be put into practice. A number

expressed their opinion that the trade unions had failed to measure up to the demands posed by the globalisation of production. Below, we reproduce a number of comments by those taking part in the demonstration.

J. M. Waroquier: “I work in the sheet mill at the Volkswagen factory in Forest, and there is a 99 percent chance we will lose our jobs in the department. We only learned of the social disaster that confronts us just two weeks ago. We hope that the trade unions can make a good job of things. It is difficult to objectively judge what they are doing because they keep everything secret.”

When asked about the necessity of developing an international struggle, Waroquier said: “I think that would be great, but unfortunately it is somewhat utopian. We can already see how difficult it is to unite the Walloon and Fleming nationalities in Belgium. I have my doubts whether such unity is possible on a worldwide basis. It would be terrific if it succeeded because workers have the same problems everywhere.”

Lucien is a teacher in a state school: “I think the action has to continue and must spread. One cannot count on the union leaderships in this respect. At the very least, one must mobilise throughout the country, but even better would be European solidarity and beyond.” With regard to the Iraq war, he said: “It is necessary to challenge the entire capitalist system. But what is missing at present is a vanguard, a party for the working class.”

Najar has worked for 20 years at Philips in Belgium and attended the demonstration as part of a large delegation from his factory: “I work in the same field as the VW workers. We came to express our solidarity with those Volkswagen workers who will lose their jobs. I know many people who work at the VW plant. In addition, we endorse a social Europe that has the interests of the individual at its heart. We have had enough of transfers of production, which have devastating consequences for workers and their families. All of this takes place in the interests of profit. We are dissatisfied with the government, which just lets all this happen. It offers absolutely no protection against the companies and entrepreneurs.”

Ulric: “I do not work in the automobile industry, quite the opposite. I work for an ecological alternative, the bicycle. That does not prevent me, however, from coming here and expressing my support: for a social Europe and for investment, in order to guarantee jobs for us here, but also on an international level. What is taking place today is bound up with the fact that we probably did not react quick enough to the consequences of the globalisation of the economy, and what that means for us concretely today, as well as for all other workers in India, China or Africa.”

When questioned on the trade unions he said: “I think the trade unions are not sufficiently forward-looking. Therefore we need a reorganisation. From a historical standpoint, the role of the trade unions is of great importance. I am aware that I am able to benefit today from the struggles carried out in the past. But for too long the trade unions have failed to think globally. One example is the environmental question, which is important for the future. It concerns us and the entire world.”

Adil P. is Sudanese and has lived in Belgium for 10 years as a so-called “sans-papier” (i.e., an undocumented worker): “I came with

my comrades to support the Volkswagen workers. Because I have no proper [permanent residency] permit—although I have been here for 10 years—I suffer just as much as they do. That is why I am here. I want to support them to ensure that we all have work and can lead a reasonable life. We would like the government to change its politics so that we have all a job and proper living conditions. All of Europe must fight for this, it really is a huge problem. When one is without a proper job, then it is just as discriminatory as to be living without a permit; it is just the same.”

Kristof van Baarle is conducting a poll for the University of Antwerp: “Of course, I am here in solidarity with the people being dismissed. I think what’s taking place at the demo is good, and it confirms the research I have been doing that many people who do not work at Volkswagen are nevertheless prepared to show their solidarity with the affected workers, and that is important.”

Joseph Dammicco works at the Kraft Food Belgium group, which is currently transferring its coffee department from Lüttich to France and Berlin: “Our workplace has been closed, it has been shifted to Lavérune and Berlin. We are in the same situation as the Volkswagen Forest workers. Our workplace and production are being transferred although the company is making significant profits.

“The trade unions are being overwhelmed by globalisation with transnational companies laying down the playing field. The only factor that counts is profits, and that is unfortunate. Therefore, a maximum mobilisation of the rank and file is necessary. One must try to spur the trade unions into action so that they force the bosses to take a stand and measure up to their obligations. This situation has persisted since there had been a Europe dominated by the bosses and the companies. If we do not fight for a social Europe, then we are heading for disaster. It is necessary for workers to organise, and that there is a common plan of action that is the same for everyone in Europe, that is the only solution.”



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