

Sellout at Brussels Volkswagen plant

Trade unions agree to mass dismissals

Marianne Arens
20 December 2006

Over four weeks ago Volkswagen workers at the Forest plant in Brussels went on strike and occupied the factory to protest against management's decision to transfer production of the company's Golf model from Brussels to factories in Germany. However, the workers' actions were unable to overcome the treachery of the trade union leaders and prevent the company from carrying out its plans.

As telegrams expressing solidarity were piling up at the Forest factory, works councils and union officials were organizing the systematic isolation of the striking Belgian Volkswagen workers.

Nothing in the way of effective solidarity action was undertaken at Volkswagen's six large factories in Germany. The Volkswagen European works council did everything it could to limit any displays of solidarity to symbolic protests and prevent the development of a principled and united defence of all jobs.

At a meeting of the works councils from various European VW plants on December 7, any combined struggle to defend jobs was rejected. This was the signal for the head of the German and European works councils, Bernd Osterloh, to make one of his demagogic speeches, declaring that should the company executive committee not shift its position "in favour of our colleagues ... we will start thinking about concrete forms of solidarity. Not on paper, but through genuine physical mobilisation."

Although the works council and its co-managers on the company's economic committee are intimately aware of company plans, Osterloh called on the company executive to "put its restructuring plans for other locations in Western Europe on the table."

Who was Osterloh trying to fool? It is common knowledge that the works councils have been bought off by management and that many rationalization measures have either been worked out in close cooperation with the works councils or initiated by the works councils themselves.

Against this background, VW management felt emboldened to dictate terms to its workforce in Brussels.

Last weekend, VW announced their new production plan,

which involves retaining only 2,000 of the current work force of 5,370 at the Forest plant. In 2009, Volkswagen plans to build its new Audi A1 model in Brussels with an estimated workforce of 3,000. This decision, however, is contingent on the condition "that production of the Audi model in Brussels is economically viable," according to Norbert Steingraber, who spoke on behalf of the Brussels management.

On December 18, in the midst of negotiations with the works council, Volkswagen Managing Director Jos Kayaerts declared that the most important condition for Audi production was the lowering of hourly labour costs. Belgian Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt also sought to put pressure on the workers, declaring in televised remarks that the Volkswagen workers at Forest would have to accept longer hours and lower wages.

The new production plan envisages expanded production of the Polo model at Forest next year with a workforce of no more than 2,000. These workers will be required to work 38 hours a week, instead of the current 35 hours. No payment will be made for the extra three hours work.

There are vague promises that a further 1,000 workers will not be sacked, but instead enrolled in training courses and put on short-time work until 2009, when their services may be required. But to date, no concrete decisions have been made.

It may well be the intention of management to start up production of the Audi A1 model in two years with a completely new, cheaper and nonunionised workforce. What is certain is that more than 2,000 workers will immediately lose their jobs.

Expanded production of the Polo in Brussels also threatens jobs at other Volkswagen locations that assemble the Polo, such as Pamplona and Martorell in Spain and Bratislava in Slovakia. The new plan envisages an increase in production of the Polo in Brussels from the current level of 10,000 units to 46,000.

The chairman of the VW works council in Brussels, Jan Van Der Poorten, explained on Monday that negotiations

would have to be continued because no concrete production figures had yet been given. He told Belgian journalists, however, that he hoped for a “symbolic resumption of work” this week.

It is evident that the unions and the works council have already accepted the plans for eliminating jobs and are preparing to sign the necessary contract. This was confirmed by the comment of Manuel Castro from the Belgian industrial trade union FTGB, who demanded “better guarantees for the job dismantling, and for pension agreements and production in 2007-08.”

In order to smooth the way for the sell-out, the works council and management have agreed relatively high levels of compensation for those who quit voluntarily. The compensation payments vary between €25,000 and €144,000, depending upon seniority—a deal which is designed to encourage older workers to resign. On the basis of such payments, VW management boasted that it had fulfilled all its requirements as a responsible employer.

It has been reported that more than 1,500 workers have announced their intention to seek early redundancy—a figure which itself expresses the lack of confidence amongst workers in the unions and the works council. There is no longer any expectation that the unions will do anything to effectively defend jobs.

At the same time, the corruption scandal which emerged in connection with the VW works council at Wolfsburg, Germany has spread, and now includes such persons as the former works council managing director Hans Jürgen Uhl, who was joint founder of the European Volkswagen works council and a deputy for the Social Democratic Party in the German parliament. Last Friday, his parliamentary immunity was waived, making his prosecution possible. Uhl is thought to be one of the main beneficiaries of privileges and extra payments made by Volkswagen management to a number of union functionaries.

Last Friday, reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with VW workers in Wolfsburg during the shift-change and asked their opinions on the works council and its agreement to transfer production of the Golf model from Brussels to Germany.

Bernd, a shift worker at Wolfsburg for 26 years, said, “All contracts bearing the signature of the works councils must be cancelled. Since the case of Volkert (leading works council member currently being investigated on charges of corruption), we know that they can be bought. Therefore, the contracts they have signed are no longer valid.

“And now, in Brussels, they want to stitch everything up because they know what was going on in the work force. Feelings are running very high. The union obviously no longer represents us. What’s the point of paying union

dues?”

Gisela has been a forklift driver for 10 years. She spoke about the worsened conditions at the Wolfsburg factory. In line with the new contract there, workers must now work an additional four-and-a-half hours per week and receive less than 50 percent remuneration for the extra hours.

“We no longer receive overtime pay and we work an entire Friday for nothing,” she said. “Under such conditions, one has no incentive to work. I only do the work I am told to.”

When asked about the works council, she said, “One cannot trust them. They are not in the least interested in us.”

Another worker added, “Who can believe that Osterloh knew nothing about what Volkert was up to? After all, he was his deputy. Either he is completely stupid, or he is lying.”

Karin reported that a number of workplace representatives had resigned their posts because they no longer felt able to justify decisions that adversely affected the workers. “The representatives gave up one after the other,” Karin said.

“When it comes to the works council members, one hardly sees them, and then when one does, they are driving around in a company car. That says everything. In my eyes they are not workers’ representatives.”

She added that the work had changed completely, established teams of workers had been broken up, and the mood at the factory had hit rock bottom.

Karl also expressed his lack of confidence in the works council. “Klaus Volkert was responsible for a breach of trust, which affects all of them,” he said.

“Who can one possibly trust? In the union it has obviously become common practice to look after oneself. There is no social commitment anymore.”

Karl has worked at VW Wolfsburg since 2002 on the basis of the contract model “5,000 times 5,000,” which has provided work for 5,000 new workers under worsened conditions and at lower wages. “Since then,” he said, “we have been hit with continual cuts.... The work climate has worsened and tension in the factory is increasing.”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact