

Volkswagen strike in Brussels enters third week

German VW workers express solidarity with Belgium colleagues

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The strike by Volkswagen workers at the VW Forest factory in Brussels against the loss of 4,000 jobs and the threatened closure of the factory has now entered its third week. The termination of production of the VW Golf model at the factory in the west of Brussels means—along with the potential loss of jobs at subsidiary companies—a total of 13,000 families are threatened with losing their main source of income. A demonstration by Volkswagen workers from all over Europe is due to take place Saturday, December 2, in Brussels.

The central works council at VW has taken over the task of implementing the management strategy and isolating any resistance by the workforce. The recent arrest of the chairman of the central works council, Klaus Volkert, together with investigations into the activities of 10 other works council members, makes clear that the entire works council have been bought off and are in the pocket of the company management. In one year, 2002, Volkert pocketed a total of €700,000 in payments from the company.

Volkert's replacement, Bernd Osterloh, has been involved for days in discussions with Michael Riffel, the general secretary of the company's European works council, VW management in Belgium, representatives of the Belgium government and local trade unionists. In order to sabotage any efforts by workers to undertake a principled defence of all jobs, the union bureaucrats are working out a variety of projects involving "alternative production," "early retirement" and various types of "social plans."

The proposal that the factory in Belgium could possibly take up production of an Audi model in the future with a slimmed-down workforce makes clear that the transfer of Golf production to Germany is signed and settled. Now the renewed and speculative discussion over the possibility of alternative production will be used to continue the strategy of playing off one factory and workforce against others—for example, VW's plant in Pamplona, Spain. Such a strategy must be rigorously opposed by workers.

The decision to shift production of the Golf model from Belgium to the German factories in Wolfsburg and Mosel is directly bound up with an agreement recently struck by the German Volkswagen works council for a longer working week without financial compensation at VW's German factories. From the start of November, Volkswagen workers in Germany must work an

additional four hours per week without receiving any payment.

This cynical sell-out by the IG Metall union has been accompanied with hypocritical declarations of solidarity. One press release by the union in Wolfsburg from November 30 reads, "The Wolfsburg IG Metall stands alongside Volkswagen workers in Brussels. We will not permit individual Volkswagen locations to be played off one against the other." Significantly, there is no indication in the statement that the union will oppose compulsory redundancies in Belgium.

The sell-out by the trade unions stands in glaring contrast to the reactions of ordinary Volkswagen workers, who are shocked and angry at the prospect of closure for the Brussels factory. This reaction was widely prevalent amongst VW Wolfsburg workers interviewed by a team of WSWs reporters last week. The team also distributed a thousand copies of a leaflet calling for solidarity with the Volkswagen workers in Brussels. Wolfsburg is the central VW facility in Germany with a workforce of approximately 50,000.

The WSWs statement calls for the building of independent committees to mount a defence of all jobs at all VW plants. It declares that such a principled defence of jobs demands a political break with the conceptions of social partnership and labour-management collaboration and calls for discussion on a socialist and internationalist perspective.

Nearly all workers took the WSWs leaflet, aside from a few conservative workers who declared, "Better them, than us." Several had illusions in Volkswagen. For example, one worker said, "I cannot imagine how they could simply close the Volkswagen works in Brussels. They can always find a way. They have often been able to work out a deal, even if the result is not too good." Many workers, however, were very worried about the situation, with comments such as, "If it is possible to close a factory in Belgium, then closures can be made here just as easily."

Many expressed their disappointment and scepticism over the works council. One said, "You can forget about the works council. Their first concern is to look after themselves."

our own time.”

Volker Kaczmarek has worked at is a bad atmosphere in the factory,” he said, “there is very little discussion and petty squabbles are frequent. There is no real cooperation anymore. The production system has been reorganised four or five times in the recent period.

“I heard on television that 4,000 jobs are to go in Belgium. Something must be done! Up to now I had hoped that the management could create some new jobs for the affected workers; there is a permanent need for the development of new materials.

“Volkswagen is a leading player in every aspect—it has the largest factory in the state of Lower Saxony and is one of the world’s biggest companies. But cuts and redundancies are being made everywhere, everything has become uncertain. They have new works in China and India, and a new factory is being built in Russia—how will that affect us? There is a certain degree of stability here for a while, but when one reads all the news, it is thoroughly disquieting.

“We now have to work longer without receiving any more wages. At the same time the executives are awarding themselves huge salaries and stuffing their pockets. There has to be a stop to it. At some point Volkswagen will have to pick up the tab for all this.”

When asked about the work councils and the arrest of Klaus Volkert on charges of corruption, Volker commented, “It is the same situation here with the works council. Sometimes I think they no longer represent the workers as they should, but operate instead as part of the VW executive. The works council representative who is responsible for my department told me recently, ‘If you need to talk with me just give me a ring or drop by.’ But in the section of the factory where I now work I have only seen him once.”

Manfred said, “I think that there are many corrupt people employed here. One has to prove it, however. I am naturally disappointed in Klaus Volkert. I already knew that he was on good terms with the executive committee. One could see that. But I was not aware that he was being rewarded so handsomely. He always spoke at the factory meetings. He was a good speaker, and made an amiable impression, along the lines of. ‘I will do everything for you.’”

The industrial and engineering trade union IG Metall has a high level of representation in the Wolfsburg factory and regularly receives between 80 and 90 percent of votes in the factory. On the first day of work in the factory, every new worker at Volkswagen is asked whether he or she wishes to take out membership in the trade union. The only other union active amongst production workers is a small Christian trade union, the CMV.

When asked to comment on the proposal to build workers’ committees independently of the works councils and trade unions, Manfred said, “Yes, one should think about it. The only question is: who should do it? The existing works council members carry out their activities on a full-time basis. We would have to do it on

Missing Palumbo is an Italian worker who has worked at the factory for nearly 10 years. He told the WWS, “Cuts and closures are taking place everywhere, not just in Brussels and Germany. Jobs are being cut in general. I am not such an egoist that I could say, ‘I prefer to keep my job here and am prepared to leave the workers in Brussels to their fate.’ Hopefully some sort of reasonable solution can be found for the colleagues in Brussels.

“In my opinion jobs are more important than profits. The works council really should put more pressure on the executive committee. I just wish the trade union would become a proper trade union again—that would be a good first step.”

When asked about the corruption of the works council leadership, Massimo commented, “I have only heard about it in general terms, I am not aware of the details. That’s unfortunate, of course. They have damaged VW and that’s also the car I drive. It is wrong what they have done with our money and, much worse, what they have done with our trust. There has been a substantial loss of confidence. It would be much better if Osterloh could do things differently.”

When asked to comment on the call for independent workers’ defence committees, Massimo said, “There has to be someone who is prepared to represent our interests. We have no idea about the people at the top, what they are up to. They are not thinking about us. We only see what comes out at the end.

“First of all came the reduction in hours in 1997. At that time we were working just five hours a day, then came a new model. Now we are again working longer—unfortunately without any wage increase. We are working longer for nothing at all, just for the company. That is just not right.”

Giuseppe Cioffro has worked at VW for 33 years: “I can tell what we need is an international trade union. I have been to China four times as part of my work and I could tell you some tales: industrial safety, environmental protection, hygiene—there is nothing of the kind there. I have also been to Russia several times.

“A trade union can do nothing on a national level, there has to be a trade union which functions at a world level. Globalisation consists of worldwide enterprises, and none of the top bosses is prepared to let anyone tell him what he should do? The executive committee establishes the framework, and the IG Metall just plays along. IG Metall can therefore be blackmailed. At a national level the trade union can achieve nothing, nothing at all.”



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