

Volkswagen workers in Brussels speak to the WSWs: the unions' role is "shameful"

Our reporters
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Striking autoworkers are still maintaining a round-the-clock picket at the gates of the Volkswagen plant at Forest in Brussels, Belgium. During the Christmas break, the works council tried on several occasions to end the blockade of the factory and send workers home—but without success.

There was much discussion among striking workers about the relatively high levels of redundancy payments. The issue came up during conversations with two VW workers, Philip and Christian, who both rejected the proposed deal because the future of the workforce remains completely unclear. Workers are essentially being told to vote on a "blank cheque."

Philip: "In my opinion an enormous amount of manipulation is taking place here, it's like a film with a bad script. In April and early May [prior to Belgium's next parliamentary elections], we'll see politicians and union leaders on television claiming we won a victory.

"The unions have concentrated in particular on the redundancy payments, which were planned in the first place for those workers who already had other employment and wanted to leave anyway. Now, based on these large sums, there's been a flood of applications from all those who have doubts about the future of the company; they prefer to take the money and go. It's a big temptation, which is being used to manipulate people. Over 1,900 workers want to take the premiums, although I'm absolutely sure they have no other work.

"The trade unions are not doing their job—either here in Belgium or in Germany. The premium payments are there in order to prevent any disruption, to keep the rank and file quiet. The demands of the bosses are being imposed—but in such way as to avoid damage. Such a role on the part of the unions is really shameful. The unions and management—all of them are playing their part."

Christian: "Many have now already left, in particular older workers, those with experience. If they get rid of all those over 50, then what remains of the experience contained in this plant?"

The two men were particularly frustrated about the fact

that they had never received more than bits and pieces of information about the state of negotiations, and both demanded that all talks be made public.

Philip: "If the works council holds negotiations with management, then I propose they do it publicly."

Christian: "As is the case with political debates in parliament: you can listen, even if you can't say anything. At such a large company, negotiations should be carried out in a public place. We elected these people so that they could speak on our behalf, because not everyone can talk at the same time. But it must be possible to directly follow the negotiations they carry out.

"The problem is that we ask the delegates after every meeting what was discussed, and they always say: yes, you will get a report. But then it takes days and weeks until we learn anything of what was discussed. Sometimes there are minutes, but then a copy is given to management, another to the works council and one goes to the press—and what about us? It's crazy, but we're always the last ones to be informed."

Alain Desmet has also decided to vote "No" on Friday. He told our reporters: "In 1985, the total workforce was 8,400, now it's to be pared down to 2,000—although we produce cars on the basis of outstanding quality, often better than in Wolfsburg [VW's central works in Germany]. They're just investing money now to get rid of people and retain an intact factory with fewer, but qualified personnel. Many workers are taking the compensation because they know that because of illness or other reasons, they wouldn't be able to stay for any length of time anyway."

Alain has worked for VW for 19 years and has been engaged for the last 5 years checking instrument panels and other fittings. He enjoys his job and regards it as his responsibility to carry out good-quality work: "People spend at least 15,000 euros [US\$19,500] on one of these cars, so it is important that every screw sits properly."

Mario Mailis is worried that deal. “We need a two-thirds majority to vote down the deal. Otherwise the rejection will not be recognised,” Mario said. He has worked at Volkswagen for the 37 years and told us:

“The German union IG Metall came to Brussels two years ago to put pressure on us. They said they had agreed to various worse conditions for workers in Germany and that we would have to accept similar things in Belgium. We thought at the time that if the IG Metall accepts such conditions, we would have to as well. We didn’t know at the time that all of the union bureaucrats had been bought off by management.”

Amongst the Volkswagen workers at the gate were a large number of workers from affiliated companies, which will be hit even harder by the production cuts at Forest than the VW workers themselves. For workers at these auto parts and other firms, there are no compensation payments.

Johnson Controls, which produces car seats, has announced the dismissal of 230 workers out of its workforce of 580. The Belgian labour and economics minister, Benoît Cerexhe (CDH—Humanist Democratic Centre, the Belgian Christian Democratic party), has calculated that 2,300 workers could lose their jobs at the 35 suppliers in Belgium involved in producing the Golf model.

Kilauli Najim has worked for the last 17 years at the Danish cleaning company ISS, which conducts industrial cleaning at the Volkswagen plant. Together with a group of fellow workers, Kilauli had joined the picket at the gates in order to express his solidarity with the Volkswagen workforce. He told us: “We are not sitting here for compensation, but for our jobs. They are closing the premises where I work. Nearly a hundred people are affected, and they’re only going to keep 20 employees.

“We’re working there with materials that are incredibly injurious to health. Our health is of no consideration to them. That’s why many have already left who couldn’t take it any longer. To begin with, they even promised us the chance of a job with Volkswagen, but I no longer believe it.”

Jessica is also employed by an auto parts company, Arvin Meritor, which installs doors for the Golf and Polo models at the VW Forest factory. Jessica explained that she had already been dismissed: “Our workforce went on strike at the same time as Volkswagen, because our company has already dismissed part-time workers and those with temporary contracts, together with 30 full-time workers. Just 14 of the remaining 33 employees at the company will keep

their jobs. They call it ‘collective mass redundancies.’ For my part, I would gladly work at Volkswagen, but at the moment I have no idea what will happen to me.”

The Stalinist organisation, the PTB (*Parti du Travail de Belgique*—Workers Party of Belgium), distributed an open letter to the workers which will reject any defence of jobs. The organisation merely demands that it should be more expensive for VW to reduce the workforce to 2,200.

The PTB calls on the Belgian state to reclaim nearly a billion euros in tax exemptions and subsidies made to VW over the last 20 years if the company insists on sacking more than 3,000 workers.

The PTB then raises the possible transfer of production of other VW models to Brussels. The organisation does not call for the retention of the Golf model in Brussels, but rather for the concentration of production there of other models, such as the Polo, which is mainly manufactured at present at the VW plant in Pamplona, Spain.

The PTB is clear that such a proposal amounts to playing off one workforce against another. As justification, it employs language almost identical to that used by Bernd Osterloh, the leader of Germany’s IG Metall union, to justify switching production of the Golf model to German locations. The PTB appeal reads: “If one supports [the production of] more cars to guarantee a maximum number of jobs at Forest, then that does not inevitably constitute a worsening of conditions at other locations.”

The same open letter then offers an alibi for IG Metall, stating: “The recent increase in working hours to 33.6 hours [at VW’s German plants] cannot be explained as a ‘betrayal’ on the part of IG Metall, as one sometimes hears on the picket line. Like us, German workers are also trying to improve their conditions against the attacks of the same capitalists—sometimes with more and sometimes with less success.”



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