

To Volkswagen workers in Brussels

Vote against the sell-out organised by the unions and works councils!

By World Socialist Web Site editorial board
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On Friday, January 5, voting began at the Volkswagen Forest plant in Brussels on the agreement negotiated between the factory works council and VW management.

At their meeting January 4, the leadership of the Forest works council and trade unions concluded negotiations on a deal directly aimed at the interests of VW workers. The deal calls for the workforce to be slashed from the current 5,400 total to just 2,200.

In line with the initial plans put forward by management, production of the Volkswagen Golf model is to be gradually ended at the Brussels factory. Instead of the planned production of a total of 200,000 vehicles over the next two years, production will be reduced to 82,500 units—12,500 of the Golf model, 46,000 of the Polo and 24,000 of an unconfirmed model.

The agreement only guarantees the existence of the Volkswagen production in Forest Brussels for a further two years—i.e., until the end of 2008. Any continuation of production beyond that date, according to management demands, is bound up with the introduction of a longer working week without payment for the extras hours worked.

According to management strategy, either the Forest factory is closed after this two-year period or—and this is the suspicion of many workers—another Volkswagen facility, for example, its plant in Pamplona, Spain, will be closed and production shifted from Pamplona to Brussels. Whatever the result, it is clear that the offensive now being carried out against the Brussels workforce is only the prelude to more wide-ranging attacks and rationalisations by Volkswagen throughout its European operations.

Works council and union officials are trying to push through the deal against the opposition of workers by claiming that the relatively high levels of compensation for those who voluntarily give up their jobs are a “great success.” The tentative deal calls for workers who quit to receive between 25,000 (US\$32,500) and 144,000 euros (US\$187,000)—depending upon seniority. In addition, so-called “generous” compensation payments have been scheduled for approximately 900 workers over 50, who take early retirement.

Workers at the plant explain that the vote on the destruction of 3,200 jobs is to be directly tied to agreement over the compensations and early retirement schedule. In other words: whoever votes against the loss of jobs also votes against the compensation and pensions package. In this way, the unions are playing off older and younger workers, as well as production workers and office employees, against one another.

The WSWS editorial board calls on Volkswagen workers in Brussels to reject the deal decisively and vote down this foul corporatist manoeuvre.

The selling off of jobs in the form of redundancy and compensation payments not only undermines the position of the working class as a whole, it places a question mark over the future of the younger generation of workers, for whom these jobs are lost forever. Entire industrial regions, including the steel and coal heartlands in Wallonia (southern Belgium) and the German Ruhr district, have been transformed into wastelands in precisely the same way—with devastating effects for the whole population.

The fact that many workers have already agreed to the compensation package, or are considering voting in favour of the deal, does not amount to their agreement

to the destruction of jobs. Instead it reflects a complete lack of confidence in the trade unions. Many workers regard the sell-out organised by the unions and works councils as signed and sealed, and no worker expects these organisations to carry out any long-term or principled fight for the defence of jobs.

Rejection of the negotiated deal must be made the starting point for a struggle against the systematic blackmail of VW workers by the work councils and union officials and for a principled defence of all jobs at all locations.

This requires a political break with the conceptions of “social partnership” and “co-determination.” Instead, a completely new perspective is necessary that proceeds from the international character of modern production and the common interests of workers worldwide. Such a perspective calls for a socialist transformation of society, which places social interests above the priorities and profits of big business and the banks.

We repeat our call for the building of independent workers’ committees against mass redundancies and social welfare cuts to oppose the cowardly and bankrupt politics of the unions, whose activities are determined by their defence of the capitalist system. And we offer our support in combining the struggle to defend jobs with the struggle for just such a socialist, internationalist perspective.



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