

Volkswagen workers in Belgium end their strike and occupation

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After a seven-week strike and occupation of their factory, Volkswagen workers on January 8 resumed work at the Forest plant in Brussels. A strike ballot held on January 5 failed to obtain the two-thirds majority necessary for a continuation of the strike.

A total of 54.6 percent of production workers and 78.5 percent of clerical employees at the plant voted in favour of terminating the strike and resuming work. Those workers who had already agreed to take compensation and redundancy payments were excluded from taking part in the ballot.

The result is not a surprise. The strike and occupation at the Forest works, which began on November 17, 2006, and won broad support from the local population, was systematically isolated by the trade unions and work councils in both Germany and Belgium.

On December 7, a special meeting the Volkswagen European works council, headed by the German union leader Bernd Osterloh, expressly decided against any extension of the dispute in Belgium to include other Volkswagen factories in Europe. Throughout the course of the strike, the German unions, led by the industrial union IG Metall, refused to organise any substantial or effective solidarity measures at VW's six main locations in Germany to support the Belgian workers.

Directly before the vote was due to take place on January 5, the Belgian work councils officially requested that all three unions representing workers at the Forest factory support the deal worked out by management and the union leadership to end the strike. A works council meeting the day before the rank-and-file vote concerned itself almost exclusively with technical and organisational details involved in the resumption of work, with the aim of minimising problems arising from the resumption of production.

The fact that the ballot was to be held on a Friday (January 5) and the result was not predetermined did not

prevent factory management from sending a letter to all workers calling on them to report punctually to work Monday morning. The works councils refrained from making any protest against this provocative act of management intimidation.

The vote itself linked the issue of an end to the strike with the deal struck on compensation and early retirement payments, so that any worker opposing an end to the strike could be accused of endangering payments already agreed for colleagues seeking to leave the factory. Under these conditions, the fact that nearly 46 percent of the work force opposed the deal indicates widespread opposition and a lack of confidence in the factory council and the unions.

On the evening of the ballot, there were disturbances at the factory. Some 100 workers had continued to maintain a picket line. When a group of journalists and media representatives arrived seeking to report on and film the end of the occupation, some workers, embittered by the betrayal of the unions, chased some journalists away, declaring that the presence of such "voyeurs" was out of place.

A police unit, which had been on standby in the neighbourhood during the entire seven weeks of the strike and occupation, intervened rapidly before the situation could escalate.

An atmosphere of discontent and dissatisfaction now prevails in the factory. Just two shifts have been introduced for production of the VW Golf model, instead of the former four-shift system. The night shift and weekend shift have been dropped, resulting in a loss of premiums and a decline in take-home pay for many of the workers who remain.

The deal struck at Forest means the destruction of at least 3,200 jobs. The VW workforce in Brussels is to be reduced from 5,400 to 2,200.

Volkswagen management has secured its main

demand—the transfer within the next few months of the Golf model from its Brussels factory to its main German works at Wolfsburg and its Mosel plant in eastern Germany.

The previous production level in Brussels of 200,000 vehicles will be slimmed down to 12,500 Golf vehicles and 46,000 Polo units over the next two years. Although union leaders have implied that production of an additional vehicle, the Audi A3, could commence at the factory, the newspaper *Le Soir* reports that no concrete measures have been taken at the factory for such a move.

The huge loss of jobs at the Volkswagen plant in Brussels has repercussions for many subcontractors and suppliers in the region, which are also expected to shed thousands of workers. Amongst the Belgian companies planning redundancies as a result of the deal at Forest are Johnson Controls, Arvin Meritor, Faurecia, Decoma, Alcoa, ISS and Schedle.

The Brussels area has already seen a large loss of jobs in auto production over the past few years, with the closure of the Renault factory in Vilvoorde and redundancies at General Motors in Antwerp and at the Ford plant in Gent.

The planned increase in production of the Polo model in Brussels from 10,000 to 46,000 units directly threatens other Volkswagen locations that produce Polos. Jobs are first and foremost at risk at the Pamplona and Martorell plants in Spain, and/or the VW factory in Bratislava (Slovakia). The deal in Belgium represents a new stage in the drive for increased productivity, with plants being systematically played off against one another.

Contrary to the claims made by the works council and unions, the existence of the Belgian Volkswagen plant is by no means guaranteed. Quite the opposite is the case.

The promise to commence production in 2009 of the new Audi A1 model in Brussels is dependent on an extension of work hours without a corresponding increase in wages. During this period, other Volkswagen works will confront closure—if not Forest in Brussels, then the Pamplona plant or another factory. The attacks against the VW workforce in Brussels is only the prelude for further, even more drastic steps aimed at rationalising and downsizing Volkswagen's operations throughout Europe.

The Belgian works council has hailed the large sums agreed for compensation and redundancy payments. Those workers who voluntarily quit have been promised payments, depending on seniority, of between 25,000 and 144,000 euros. In addition, some 900 workers over the age of 50 have been allowed to take early retirement.

The readiness of the company to agree to such payments makes clear its determination to end the strike and occupation in Brussels in such a way as to minimise its production losses, a goal it pursued in the closest collaboration with the unions.

The chairman of the Volkswagen executive, Ferdinand Piech, is an Austrian multimillionaire and grandchild of Ferdinand Porsche, who, at the behest of Reichsführer Adolf Hitler, produced the Volkswagen Beetle model.

In his role as manager, Piech has considerable experience in dealing with the unions. Shortly before undertaking a major overhaul of the entire company, Piech freed up several million euros to secure the support of German work councils in suppressing workers' resistance to his plans.

On the eve of the ballot on the union-management deal, the editorial board of the *World Socialist Web Site* issued an appeal to the Belgian Volkswagen workers, calling for a "no" vote and stating: "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."

The statement continued: "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."



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