

# Belgium Volkswagen workers resume strike

A correspondent  
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On the evening of Wednesday, January 24, workers at the Volkswagen Forest factory in Brussels resumed their strike.

Workers decided to recommence their strike following a works council meeting held on Wednesday evening, which ended with a demand to management that verbal assurances about the future of the factory be ratified in writing. Up until now the local VW management had inferred that it would be possible to produce an alternative auto model (Audi A1) at the Forest factory, but no definite agreement was made, meaning that the future of the factory remains open. Workers fear that talk of production of a new model is just one more in a string of empty promises made by the factory management and trade unions.

The strike continued over Thursday and Friday with workers blocking the factory gates to prevent blacklegging or materials being removed from the factory. The management has officially chosen to describe the factory as closed due to “technical unemployment.”

Another factory meeting held on Thursday morning confirmed the continuation of the strike. According to the *Belga* web site, a shop steward for the FGTB trade union, Hedwin De Clercq, declared that talks would be held with the management aimed at reaching an agreement by Monday on the future of the factory.

For his part, the managing director of VW Forest, Jos Kayaert, revived the prospect of a full-scale closure of the factory and declared that the strike lessened the chances for the survival of the plant. The Belgium labor minister, Peter Vanvelthoven, has stated his intention to intervene in the dispute as a “social arbitrator.”

Workers had recommenced shifts at the factory on January 8 following a seven-week-long strike and occupation at the end of last year. The deal struck by VW management and the trade unions to end the dispute envisaged reduced production at the plant.

Instead of the current total of 200,000 vehicles, less than 60,000 (12,500 Golf models and 46,000 Polos) were to be produced in Brussels. The new production targets require in principle just 1,500 of the current total workforce of 5,400. Two thousand workers had already agreed to quit their jobs in exchange for redundancy money at the end of the strike.

The remaining workers were told that production of an additional model could begin in 2007 with production of the new Audi A3 to commence in 2009, but no measures were introduced at the factory to indicate that the management was serious in its intentions.

Workers at the factory now fear that talk and promises of the possible production of alternative models were merely aimed at strangling the strike and occupation and breaking down the resistance of the workforce.

Following the resumption of production at the factory just two shifts were operating, instead of the original four. The night and weekend shifts were dropped, resulting in considerable losses of bonuses for the remaining workforce.

Following fresh talks on Friday afternoon and evening Labor Minister Vanvelthoven announced that a new agreement had been worked out between VW and the trade unions, which allegedly guarantees increased production for 2008 (84,000 units) and 2009 (100,000 units of the Audi A1 model). Despite the fact that these new targets still do not measure up to the original promise of 200,000 units, the trade unions expected workers to resume work Monday, January 29 on the basis of this latest agreement.

The seven-week strike and occupation in Brussels at the end of last year was systematically sold out by the Belgian and German trade unions. The jobs lost at the Forest factory are just one further example of the way in which the trade unions have played a crucial role in

playing off one factory and workforce against another—to the detriment of all Volkswagen workers and the many thousands of others who work in a subsidiary or supply capacity for the auto industry.

At a special meeting of trade union representatives from VW's European Works Council on December 7, the chairman of the committee, Bernd Osterloh, expressly refused to call for effective solidarity action to back the Forest strikers. As a result no action was taken by workers at any of VW's six large plants in Germany to back the struggle of their Belgium colleagues. The entire course of the industrial dispute in Brussels up to now must serve as a warning to the workforce to place no confidence in their trade union leadership and reject this latest attempt by the management, trade unions and Belgian government to pressure them back to work.



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