

Study tracks the fate of German shipyard workers

Werner Albrecht, Dietmar Henning
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On a daily basis, the German media reports on the transfer of production to new locations and countries, factory closures and waves of new redundancies. The trade unions seek to justify such developments by arguing that they are actively seeking to get the best deal for workers, by cushioning redundancies with such measures as social plans and transitional job schemes. The end result is that the jobs are gone and the workers sooner or later land on the streets.

It is only rarely that one ever hears of what has happened to those workers after they have lost their jobs. The majority of the population is familiar with such situations—either through personal experience, or the case of a family member or friend. Unemployment is a widespread occurrence. But there is a definite lack of scientific analyses, which systematically explore the social implications resulting from the sacking of an entire workforce.

The “Society, Work and the Future” group (Verein Arbeit und Zukunft e. V.—VAZ) in Bremen has produced a study that deals precisely with such issues. The report is subtitled “Ten Years Since the Bankruptcy of Vulkan: What Became of the Workers?” and deals with the fate of shipyard workers made redundant after the Vulkan shipbuilding company declared bankruptcy in August 1997.

In December 2006, a group of researchers under the direction of Wolfgang Hien from the University of Bremen sent questionnaires to 1,375 former Vulkan workers. Extensive interviews were then carried out with 35 former employees.

The workforce had initially received a questionnaire in 1999/2000—two to three years after the closure of the company. At that time, the authors wrote: “The results were frightening: one third were without work, and among those over 50 this percentage rose to 50 percent. At the same time, the state of health of the former workers had worsened dramatically following the closure. Hardest hit were the age group 50-59, who were too young to qualify for a pension and too ill to work.”

Today, the situation seems to have improved somewhat, but one fifth of the former workforce remains unemployed.

And while the state of health of the workforce has improved slightly since 2000, this group of workers still remains substantially handicapped compared to other groups of industrial workers. In addition to the physical hardships resulting from unemployment and the miserly new unemployment payments (Hartz IV) introduced by the former Social Democratic Party-Green Party government, the researchers were able to detect massive psychological problems among the former Vulkan employees.

At the end of April 1996, the Bremen Vulkan company declared bankruptcy. At the time, the company employed more than 2,000 workers at its main plant in north Bremen.

Well into the 1980s, Vulkan ranked as one of the biggest shipyards in Germany and, together with its predecessor company at the same location, was responsible for the construction of more than 1,000 ships of all categories: tankers of all sizes, steamships, containers, freighters, submarines, fishing vessels and cruise ships such as the renowned Costa Victoria.

The history of the docks, which at one point was the biggest employer in Bremen, goes back to the year 1893. Referring to the past, some workers declare in the VAZ report: “It was a good time, but the work was punishing.”

In fact, the forms of labour involved in the “good times” had long-term consequences for the health of the workforce. The authors point out that the testimony of former Vulkan workers corresponds almost to the letter to the descriptions of labour made by Karl Marx in his work *Capital*, written more than 130 years ago.

Despite the hard manual labour involved, the workforce—and indeed the entire region—was shocked by the news in 1996 that the company was bankrupt. The IG Metall union representing the workforce complained loudly at the time but in the end collaborated in implementing the job cuts alongside the shipyard’s works council.

The trade unions and works council commenced their time-worn ritual of fruitless protest: rallies with cake stands, face painting for young children, church services, rock concerts and declarations of support from local football players.

The union categorically rejected any occupation of the works to defend jobs of all Vulkan workers. Instead, IG-Metall and the works council offered to cooperate with management over ways to “organise the work more effectively.”

Then, after promising the workers a generous social plan and compensation for redundancy, the union abruptly confronted workers with a carefully prepared four-page contract, which they called on all of the employees to sign—“for the sake of solidarity.” None of the workers were aware of what was in the agreement, which amounted to a waiver of their employment contract. The workers lost all of the benefits bound up with their old contracts in exchange for their participation in a “transitional occupation scheme.”

Union officials threatened dismissals and reduced wages and compensation payments should too few workers sign the new contract. On August 15, 1997, Vulkan closed its gates for the last time and a total of 2,500 workers lost their jobs.

The role of the trade union and the works council is not dealt with in the VAZ study, which includes the participation of a former Vulkan works council member. The interviews included, however, indicate the psychological pressures bearing down on the workforce.

For the large majority of workers, the closure of the dockyard represented both a personal and social disaster. Working lives had been shattered with unforeseen consequences for workers and their families.

For the highly qualified skilled workforce, transfer into occupational work schemes represented a demotion into the worst forms of the cheap-wage job market. The report makes clear that around 40 percent of the former Vulkan workers live on or under the official poverty line. One worker who has been plagued by repeated slipped discs, asbestos poisoning and hearing defects, and is now dependent on Hartz IV payments, declares: “I do not know how things will end up.... We can no longer afford a vacation. All that is left is to dream or stare at the television, while others take a vacation. In the past I used to fish, but now I cannot afford the fees.”

It is not only unemployment that has led to poverty. Also affected are those “better-paid” workers who took early retirement. One such worker reports of a discussion in which he explained his situation: “All of them looked at me in complete surprise, when I said that I received less than 1,000 euros per month, after 43 years of work and 47 years of pension contributions. They said: ‘That cannot be allowed.’ But it is so: After all these years, during which I was never unemployed, I now receive a pension of exactly 965 euros.”

Any chance of taking early retirement on the basis of a recognised occupational illness has also been made virtually impossible by a host of bureaucratic measures. The authors

of the VAZ report speak of a “mockery of patients” by the different relevant institutions. The report declares: “The interviews of nearly all of those workers in their late fifties are full of situations which recalls the stories of Franz Kafka: the victims are subjected to an absurd, apparently hopeless world of authoritarian injustice.”

Although a slipped disc is officially recognised as an occupational illness, the professional association that adjudicates such cases states “that the severity of this type of work did not predominate at the Vulkan shipyard” and the accounts given by those affected “are not credible.” Employees who have worked themselves to death for decades at Vulkan must now “prove” that their ill health is a product of this work. This is an impossible undertaking for the workers.

The former Vulkan workers are also scathing in their judgement of the local employment office in Bremen. The stereotyped response of the labour office was inevitably: “We have nothing for you and we will not have in the future.” The workers are either too old or too ill. The only type of work available was employment with an agency in workplaces operating without proper contracts and that were often up to 100 kilometres removed—although no travel costs were paid.

The interviews and survey data allow only one conclusion: many of the former dockworkers, who failed to find alternative work, were systematically debased and demoralised. In combination with financial problems and fears for the future, this inevitably leads to problems in the worker’s marriage and partnership (one chapter takes up this question), as well as an alarming high rate of depressive illnesses. Nearly a third of the former Vulkan workers suffer from depression, while 5 percent suffer from severe depression.

The study states: “Unemployment is one of the most relevant causes for the deterioration of psychiatric health. Compared with the employed, former Vulkan workers are four times more likely to suffer ill health and the risk of depression increases fivefold.”

The material put together in the study deals clearly and concretely with the tragic consequences of losing one’s job. The report represents a shocking indictment of official politics—and in particular, the corporatist policies of the trade unions and works councils, which led to the workers losing their jobs in the first place.



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