

German Volkswagen workers fear job cuts

Our correspondents
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While company management, the IG Metall trade union and the works council are conspiring behind the scenes on a radical restructuring of Volkswagen, workers are being left in the dark.

Many workers fear that they will be left to foot the bill when the full impact of the VW emissions scandal hits. This was illustrated in discussions with VW workers at the Hannover plant last Wednesday, when the new issue of *Autoarbeiter Info* (Autoworkers Newsletter) was distributed.

The plant in the Stocken district is the headquarters of Volkswagen utility vehicles (VWN), a subsidiary of Volkswagen AG. Currently, around 14,000 workers are employed there, including more than 9,100 in production and around 3,000 in administration. The plant is also an internal VW supplier, the centre of part of the company's logistics branch and subsidiary Sitech Sitztechnik GmbH. An additional 1,800 workers are employed there.

The plant has been in operation since 1956, beginning with production of the VW Transporter and later the VW bus from the T-model series. Since 2009, and up to 2016, the chassis for the Porsche Panamera has been built there, before being installed onto vehicles at Porsche's Leipzig factory. The Amarok model has also been built in Hannover since 2012. The pick-up was one of the vehicles equipped by VW with the manipulated diesel engines designed to evade emissions testing.

Since the announcement in mid-October by management that short-term contract workers faced the possible loss of their jobs, the VW works council has responded by seeking to placate the workers. Around 7,000 contract workers are already employed at VW in Germany. Workers estimate their number in Hannover to be between 1,500 and 2,000. Company management refuses to provide more accurate figures.

A spokesman for the works council declared "support

for all options to secure the jobs of our colleagues on short-term contracts." The works council and IG Metall are hoping that the German government will extend regulations on reduced working hours to workers with short-term contracts. Economics minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) announced this at the beginning of October during a visit to VW's main plant in Wolfsburg.

These are all efforts to pacify the workers on the part of IG Metall and the works council. They want to avoid the spread of dissatisfaction in the plants so they can continue their backroom talks with management to restructure the company.

Son, a worker with an Asian background, explained that the works council had declared at an info meeting that the contract books are full and orders had not dropped. This was in line with claims by the company, which nonetheless announced on the same day a loss of €3.5 billion in the third quarter. These losses are connected to the €6.7 billion already set aside by management for the costs of the emissions scandal thus far. Additional millions will follow. There are differing estimates on this, ranging from €30 billion to €100 billion.

It is clear to many workers that these losses will be offloaded to them. Everyone we spoke to was convinced that short-term contract workers will be the first victims of the company's criminal machinations.

Mehmet is a short-term contract worker in logistics for the VW pick-up. "The first thing to go will certainly be the premium for VW workers." This amounted to €5,900 in 2015. "And all we contract workers will have to go," he continued. Officially, he has yet to hear anything. A colleague, who was a contract employee at Sitech, has already been told his contract will not be extended.

Several workers confirmed to us that reduced working hours is a topic of discussion in the plant.

“Then the four-day week could be introduced. We would then of course have to lose a corresponding part of our wages.”

Many of Mehmet’s colleagues were convinced that the night shift would be abandoned in the New Year. “The contract workers will then be pushed out” by permanent VW employees on the night shift, feared a younger contract worker. He came to Germany 25 years ago with his parents from Iran and has worked in the VW plant for a year and a half.

“I had hoped that I would be taken on permanently after three years at the latest—that would be in March 2017.” Now, things looked bad, but he continued to hope. “Through relatives, I could work in the restaurant sector, but here at VW it is something different; better work and better wages.”

He reported that with the prospect of a permanent wage at VW, some of his colleagues on contracts had taken on mortgages for apartments and houses. “These are fathers of young families; if they lose their jobs, they will have a real problem.”

Like their colleagues in Kassel, many workers in Hannover are critical of the works council and IG Metall.

Friedrich believes that they were implicated in the software manipulation in the diesel engines. “Of course they’re not saying so.” He feared, as did many others, that the scandal “will have major consequences for all of us—on jobs, on pay.” During a discussion of how workers in all countries confronted the same problems, he answered, “Of course international collaboration with colleagues, for example, in the US or Japan is correct. But nobody dares open their mouth. Everyone is worried about their job.”

Arkadius also commented that nobody believes the trade union and works council knew nothing about the emissions manipulation. He has been employed as a contract worker since March by VW’s own short-term contract firm, Autovision-Zeitarbeit GmbH. His contract has only been extended to January. The same currently applies to all contract workers whose contracts are running out, he said.

He reported he had been “advised” to join IG Metall. That was an unwritten rule at VW. Other colleagues explained how union reps and works councillors applied pressure by warning that they “unfortunately” could not do anything about extending contracts or

making them permanent for non-members.

Numerous workers confirmed this. It was not only the hectic shift change that made some workers remain silent. It is also the pervasive suppression of all critical initiatives of workers by senior union and works council representatives.

One worker spoke bluntly, but chose to remain anonymous as a result. He also began at VW as a contract worker, but now had a permanent position. “It’s a mafia. Management, IG Metall and works council—they’re suffocating everyone.” IG Metall was now campaigning for everyone to support the company. At the employees’ meeting after the emissions scandal, the union distributed t-shirts bearing the logos of VW and IG Metall, with the slogan “We are one family.” “That’s just propaganda. That’s what they say everywhere, wherever job cuts and wage cuts are coming. It’s the preparation for that.”

In the 59-year history of the plant, around 9.5 million vehicles have rolled off the conveyor belt. The plant is the largest private sector employer in the capital of Lower Saxony. Due to the decision of VW management to manipulate and commit fraud, rather than invest in the development of clean engines, the jobs of thousands of workers are now at risk.

The lead article in the latest issue of *Autoarbeiter Info* draws vital lessons from the close cooperation of management, the trade union and works council. The VW workforce “confront the problem that the trade union methods and organizations of the past are totally exhausted. There is no other business where social partnership and class collaboration has been so perfected than VW. IG Metall, the works council and management have practically merged. ... To struggle against the company’s attacks, workers have to break with the nationalist politics of the trade unions, build their own, independent action committees and unite internationally.”



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