

Support the strike by VW workers in Slovakia!

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26 June 2017

Ulrich Rippert is chairman of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and is standing for the SGP in North Rhine Westphalia for the federal elections on 24 September.

On June 20 more than 8,000 Volkswagen workers went on strike in Slovakia, halting production at the company's plant in the capital city of Bratislava. The strikers are demanding a wage increase of 16 percent and improved working conditions. Management has rejected their demands and is offering a miserly 4.5 percent raise this year, 4.2 percent next year and a one-time €350 bonus.

After negotiations broke down Thursday local union officials said the strike would continue over the weekend and into this coming week.

In Germany, the IG Metall union, which has 120,000 members at six VW plants, is maintaining its silence about the Slovakian strike while working to isolate the embattled workers from their class brothers and sisters in Germany and throughout Europe.

Neither the union nor its representatives on the VW Works Council at the company's headquarters in Wolfsburg have made a single statement. When questioned by the *World Socialist Web Site*, an IG Metall press spokeswoman in Wolfsburg, Anita Pöhlig, said, "We are not making any comments on the strike activities at the Bratislava plant." Asked if this meant the IG Metall was opposed to the strike, Pöhlig replied, "As I said, no comment."

As the candidate of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) in North Rhine Westphalia for the federal elections, I appeal to all workers to support the strike of the Slovakian VW workers. I especially urge VW workers in Germany and internationally to take active solidarity action with their colleagues in Bratislava. This is first strike at Volkswagen since the company moved to Slovakia in 1991, and the first strike in a large car factory in the Eastern European country since the introduction of capitalism.

The demands of the striking workers are fully justified. The claims by the company and the media that Slovakian VW workers receive a monthly salary of €1,804 (\$US2,020) and are privileged top earners is a blatant lie. WSWs readers

from Bratislava report that production line workers do not earn more than €800 (\$US896) per month. Even if other allowances and the Christmas bonus are included, this is still not enough to pay the exorbitant prices and rents in the Slovakian capital. Rent in Bratislava for a small two-room apartment, for example, is about €700 a month, and often over €1,000 for a three-room flat.

The strike expresses a growing self-confidence of the working class in Slovakia and other Eastern European countries. The French PSA group (Peugeot/Citroën) and the South Korean manufacturer Kia were recently compelled to increase wages in their Slovakian plants by 6.3 and 7.5 percent respectively. The time when the large auto manufacturers could reap huge profits through the super-exploitation of workers is coming to an end. Throughout the factories workers are refusing to accept poverty wages while the corporate and financial overlords live in luxury and splendor.

The growing militancy of workers has led to increased concern in corporate, media and trade union circles. Leading German business daily *Handelsblatt* wrote last Thursday, "Bratislava is only three-quarters of an hour by car from Vienna, where workers receive double or triple for doing the same job." Under the headline, "Rude awakening in auto paradise," the paper of finance capital writes, "For a long time, Slovakia was considered an auto paradise. Low wages, low taxes, and an industrial policy under government chief Robert Fico, who read the wishes from the lips of the auto manufacturers. But the location is developing into a nightmare for the Wolfsburg auto giant."

What *Handelsblatt* means by the nightmare for Wolfsburg's corporate management, is the possibility that the strike will spark resistance throughout the region. In the neighbouring Czech Republic, a worker earns even less than an autoworker in Slovakia. The corporations fear that workers in other Eastern European countries—which have long used by European corporations to drive down wages and conditions throughout the continent—will follow the example of the Slovakian VW workers. This could lead to a

wildfire of class struggle that could spread to Germany and Western Europe itself.

With the collusion of IG Metall, the CGT in France and Unite in the UK, the global auto giants have imposed savage wage and social benefit cuts on workers throughout Western Europe. In the German factories, temporary and contract employees are already forced to work for wages that are just as miserable as in Bratislava, side-by-side with permanent workers making far higher pay and benefits.

For more than 25 years, the major international corporations have used Eastern Europe as an “extended workbench” and low-wage haven. After the Stalinists re-introduced capitalism into these countries, the corporations shifted a significant portion of their operations to Eastern Europe to exploit the well-trained workforce at a fraction of the wages paid in the West.

The extreme exploitation is based on two factors. First is a corrupt trade union bureaucracy, which operate unions that impose management’s dictates in every factory and stifle all resistance. The second is the political confusion that prevailed after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc.

The collapse of the anti-working-class Stalinist regimes and the introduction of capitalist exploitation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was presented as the supposed failure of socialism and triumph of capitalism and so-called democracy.

A quarter of a century later, the true character of capitalist restoration is evident. The attacks on the wages and social gains of workers have not been confined to Eastern Europe. Instead they are taking place in every country, including throughout Europe, the United States and Asia. Everywhere the ruling classes are waging a war against the living standards of the great majority of the population while a small clique at the top of society enriches itself without restraint. According to a report by Oxfam, the eight richest billionaires in the world now possess as much wealth as the poorest half of the world’s population, i.e., 3.6 billion people!

In the US—the country celebrated as a shining example of capitalist prosperity—the gap between rich and poor has grown exponentially. With President Donald Trump, a government of billionaires, military brass and right-wing extremists has now taken power that threatens the whole world with war.

Behind this is the insoluble crisis of the capitalist system, which subordinates all social needs to the ever-greater accumulation of wealth by the capitalist owners. The private ownership of the means of production, the profit principle and the nation-state system on which capitalism rests cannot be reconciled with an increasingly integrated global

economy based on an international division of labour and world-wide exchange. Just as they did one hundred years ago, the capitalists are reacting to the crisis of their system with attacks on the working class, dictatorship and war.

The strike of the VW workers is vital because it is directly linked to this global development of the class struggle. The fight to defend the Slovakian VW workers must be the starting point for a broad political mobilisation of the working class against social inequality, poverty and war.

However, if this struggle is to be successful it cannot be limited to a trade union perspective. A massive transnational corporation like VW and the powerful financial institutions that stand behind it cannot be fought on a national basis or through impotent appeals to political parties that are thoroughly controlled by the global corporations.

The trade union “Modern odborov Volkswagen” split last year from the corrupt OZ KOVO, which is closely linked to IG Metall and VW management. While calling the strike under the pressure of militant workers, the Slovakian union abides by the same nationalist conception of “social partnership” with the bosses as its predecessor and IG Metall. The union has already signaled its willingness to end the strike as quickly as possible and reach a compromise that will maintain the pariah status of workers.

It is no coincidence that Zoroslav Smolensky, the head of the new trade union, was a functionary of the old OZ KOVO for many years.

It is necessary to set up an independent action committee to guide the strike and to establish links with other factories and workers.

The strike must be extended! Lines of communication and links need to be established with VW workers and all workers across Europe and in other countries. The strike must be the starting point for a broad industrial and political counter-offensive by the working class.

The struggle against low wages and social cutbacks requires a socialist perspective and an international strategy. It is only within the framework of a policy aimed at unifying workers world-wide—regardless of their origin and nationality—against the capitalist profit system that the strike can develop the required resilience and tenacity.

In this struggle, the SGP will provide all the necessary support possible. We call on all workers to contact us to discuss these questions and build the essential leadership for this struggle.



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