

The importance of the VW Strike in Slovakia

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1 July 2017

Auto workers at the Volkswagen plant in Bratislava, Slovakia resumed work at the beginning of this week. Eight thousand of the 12,300 workers at the plant had struck for six days, paralyzing production.

The trade union "Modern odborov Volkswagen" has greeted the wage deal agreed by management as a great success and claims that the 13.5 percent wage increase is a major concession in light of the strikers' original demand for 16 percent.

This is not true, however. On closer inspection, it is clear that the union has agreed to a deal only marginally higher than the offer made by VW management in April. Then the company offered a 4.5 percent wage increase with another 4.2 percent for the coming year, as well as a one-off payment of 350 euros.

Last Sunday, management agreed a 4.7 percent increase as of June 1, 2017, 4.7 percent from January 2018 and 4.1 percent from November 2018 onwards. This means a monthly increase of 32 euro for pay group 1, and a 48 euro increase for pay group 6. In addition, the company agreed a one-off payment of 500 euros which, as is always the case with such payments, will be subject to a considerable tax deduction.

The assertion that the wage increase totals 13.5 percent (4.7 percent + 4.7 percent + 4.1 percent = 13.5 percent) is standard trade union double talk, which is then echoed by the media. The fact is that each wage increase covers a separate year, meaning the actual wage contract is around five percent.

Many workers had hoped for much more, and there are many critical comments on Facebook. They accuse the union negotiation commission of capitulation and complain the strike was ended with a lousy compromise precisely at the moment when it was having a considerable impact on production at other plants. This is not what we had struck for, some workers wrote. Others asked which union bureaucrats had been bribed to agree the settlement. Some write

bluntly: "We have been tricked."

At a press conference on Monday management emphasized that the deal could have been achieved without a strike. VW CEO Ralf Sacht stated that the long duration of the contract (the end of August 2019—the longest contract in the history of the plant) was important for the company. He added, "This gives us planning security for the next two years and beyond." As is the case in Germany, the so-called "peace" obligation means that workers cannot take strike action during the duration of the contract.

The importance of the strike, however, should not be assessed merely on the basis of the limited nature of the final deal. This was the first industrial action at Volkswagen since the company moved to Slovakia in 1991 and it was the first strike at a major auto factory in the Eastern European country since the re-introduction of capitalism. It demonstrates the growing radicalization of the working class in Eastern Europe and marks a new stage in the class struggle.

The time when the big auto companies and other multinationals could use low wages to achieve maximum profits is coming to an end. There is mounting anger in factories across the region about the gulf between astronomical profits and rock bottom wages.

The minimal wage increase will do nothing to stem growing social inequality. As before, workers can barely afford reasonable accommodation and pay their day-to-day bills, despite working arduous shifts. The Slovakian capital Bratislava, on the outskirts of which the VW plant is located, is one of the most expensive cities in Europe, with above-average rents and living costs.

The contract does nothing to alter working conditions characterised by ever-increasing work demands, short breaks, constant control and the type of psychological pressure accompanying group work. One striking

worker told the *World Socialist Web Site* last week: "We work like robots on the production line." The company management will use the above-average time frame of the wage agreement to increase exploitation even further.

In other words, new and even bigger class struggles are imminent and it is important to prepare for them. This requires a ruthless assessment of previous conflicts. The strike and negotiations last week have confirmed that the limited, nationalist conceptions and the trade union mantra of social partnership are completely bankrupt.

The union "Modern odborov Volkswagen" was founded last autumn following growing resistance to the corrupt OZ KOVO union, which is closely linked to Germany's IG Metall and the company management. Despite its militant trappings "Modern odborov Volkswagen" defends the same nationalist conceptions. It was no coincidence that Zoroslav Smolensky, the new head of the union, was a long time member of the OZ KOVO.

The VW strike found considerable support in neighboring Czech Republic where the workers at the VW subsidiary Skoda earn even less than their counterparts in Slovakia. Nevertheless, the strike leadership did not call on Czech workers to actively support the strike. Workers in other Eastern European countries and Germany were also not informed of the dispute or asked to provide support. There was also no criticism from the Slovak strike committee of IG Metall, which plays the leading role among European auto workers, but kept silent about the strike and denied any sort of solidarity.

Instead, the strike leadership at Smolensky sent the company management signals indicating it was ready to end the strike as quickly as possible with a compromise. The union leadership did not want to extend the action. This was clear when a reader of the *World Socialist Web Site* in Bratislava suggested translating and spreading the WSWS appeal to support the strike. The strike leadership expressly rejected this.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the strike is the necessity to break with the nationalist and pro-capitalist perspective of social partnership and prepare a broad political mobilization of the working class based on an international socialist program.

Almost thirty years ago, the collapse of the Stalinist

regimes was celebrated as a "velvet revolution," and the subsequent introduction of capitalist exploitation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as a triumph of freedom and democracy.

Today, a quarter of a century later, the true character of capitalist restoration is evident. The attack on the wages and social gains of workers is not restricted to Eastern Europe, but is taking place worldwide. As the living standards of the vast majority of the population decline, a small clique at the top of society is piling up enormous wealth. According to a report from Oxfam, the eight richest billionaires in the world now possess the same wealth as the poorest half of the world's population, 3.6 billion people!

The US has always been celebrated as a shining example of capitalist prosperity. Today, the gulf between rich and poor is now more extreme than ever before. President Donald Trump heads a government of billionaires, military chiefs and right-wing extremists that threatens the world with war. And, far from bringing its long standing promises of "peace" and "justice," the capitalist European Union has become a breeding ground for nationalism, social counterrevolution, police state measures and militarism.

Behind these developments is the insoluble crisis of the capitalist system. Private ownership of the means of production and the nation-state upon which capitalism rests, cannot be reconciled with the global economy based on an international division of labor and trade. As was the case a hundred years ago, capitalists react to the crisis of their system with intensified attacks on the working class, dictatorship and war.

Under these conditions, any struggle to improve wages and working conditions requires a political perspective directed against capitalism, that is, a socialist program and an international strategy. It is necessary to organize independently of the trade unions, undertake a discussion of these political issues and to get in touch with the International Committee of the Fourth International and the WSWS which fights for this perspective.



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