

German automaker VW collaborated with Brazilian dictatorship

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The criminal machinations of Volkswagen are not exhausted by the diesel emissions scandal and the formation of an auto cartel. The history of Germany's largest automaker, which began under Hitler's Nazi regime, has once again caught up with VW. Research conducted by broadcasters NDR and SWR, as well as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, confirms that during the period of Brazil's military dictatorship, which ruled the country from 1964 to 1985, VW participated in the persecution of regime opponents.

The firm's own plant security service at its facility in Sao Paulo operated like an intelligence service, according to the research. It spied on VW employees, prepared lists of political opponents which ended up in the hands of the authorities, arrested militant workers and transferred them to the political police and enabled the arrest of workers by the military police on the grounds of the plant, thereby handed them over to be tortured. The company's chief executive was informed of the arrests as early as 1979.

Public Broadcaster ARD screened a documentary entitled "Collaborators? VW and the Brazilian military dictatorship" on July 24. The film showed how VW do Brasil, Volkswagen's subsidiary in Brazil, used plant security to spy upon workers opposed to the regime in the plant and in their private lives. The mere suspicion that they could be involved in trade union or communist activities was sufficient to justify VW handing workers over to the military junta. Hundreds of oppositional workers were tortured in prisons and killed as a result.

VW workers in Sao Paulo who survived have been targeting the VW company in Germany for years and demanding compensation. Two years ago, they filed a class action lawsuit and the state prosecutor in Sao Paulo has since been investigating VW.

An interview with the now 91-year-old former VW chief Carl Hahn, who was a member of the supervisory board of the company's subsidiary in Brazil at the time, exposes the ongoing and persistent callousness of the company. Hahn denied outright having known anything about the collaboration. Asked about the latest investigations, he responded cynically, "They should just do it; we have more important things to get on with here."

Hahn added that the company had the desire to move forward before noting with a smug smile, "However, I can tell you that we weren't communists."

The VW spokesman in Wolfsburg, Germany said as little as possible. Asked about the investigations, he blandly noted, "There are different interpretations, accusations must of course be proven. We should wait a little and not jump to premature conclusions."

A central figure in the 45-minute documentary is the former toolmaker Lúcio Bellentani, who tells his life story. Shortly after the military coup in 1964, the 19-year-old began his career at VW do Brasil. He soon became active on the periphery of the Brazilian Communist Party.

In the summer of 1972, secret police held a pistol to his back, arrested him and led him away in handcuffs during the night shift in the pressing plant. The armed VW plant security force and VW staff were on the scene. The first interrogation occurred in the human resources department. He was beaten, and ordered to give the names of other trade union and party activists. Since he remained silent, they brought him to the notorious prison of the political police (DOPS).

Bellentani's only "crime" was the distribution of leaflets and organisation of discussion circles. He encountered other VW colleagues in prison and still cannot forget their desperate cries. His wife was only allowed to visit him with their two small children after 47 days of imprisonment and torture. He was released after two years.

Although Lúcio Bellentani has retained his humor, he is marked by this period to the present day. He and a number of former colleagues have been meeting up for years and have absolutely no intention of letting VW off the hook. They therefore have placed a lot of hope in the class action lawsuit, which is based on their testimony.

But VW continues to play for time. Former VW chief historian Manfred Krieger, who visited Brazil in 2014 and called for a memorial for the workers, was laid off in the autumn of 2016. He was forbidden to give interviews for the documentary.

VW subsequently hired the Bielefeld-based historian Christopher Kopper, son of the long-serving spokesman for the board of Deutsche Bank, Helmar Kopper, in hopes that he would place the company's interests first in the investigation of the brutal methods of suppression employed by VW do Brasil.

But contrary to expectations, the historian, who is to present his final report in the autumn, came to similar conclusions to the research conducted by NDR, SWR and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which evaluated investigation files, internal VW papers from the period in question, documents of the VW supervisory board, reports from the Foreign Ministry and classified papers from the DOPS torture chambers under the military dictatorship.

The key finding is clear: "The picture emerging from all of this is that VW did not only collaborate and assist the regime, but was

an independent actor in the repression. A good collaborator.”

While VW do Brasil persecuted militant workers and handed them over to the goons of the military dictatorship, it was simultaneously employing and protecting high-ranking Nazi collaborators.

Following the opening of VW’s new plant in Sao Paulo in 1959, one of the first to be employed there was Franz Stangl. The SS captain was a participant in the Nazis’ T4 euthanasia program and obtained “the class I and II War Merit Cross with distinction,” according to a subsequent court ruling. In 1942, he received a promotion to commandant of the Sobibor and Treblinka concentration camps.

After the war, he fled to Brazil, like many other high-ranking Nazis. There, he worked for eight years undisturbed under his own name in VW do Brasil’s “plant maintenance.” It remains unclear whether he was involved in the plant security service. He built a house close by, where the war criminal being sought around the globe was able to live unmolested.

Asked whether he was aware that Stangl had been employed by VW do Brasil under his own name for years, former VW chief Hahn answered, “We certainly didn’t know every concentration camp commandant’s name... and that those who came from Germany would be employed there is, I think, a matter of course.”

Without the research of Simon Wiesenthal, who tracked down Nazi war criminals around the globe, Stangl would probably never have been identified or arrested. In March 1967, Wiesenthal complained in a letter to North Rhine-Westphalia’s Justice Minister Josef Neuberger that “the Volkswagen plant in Sao Paulo made available to Stangl its lawyer, Dr. Garcia, who is of course seeking to resist the extradition.” Basileu Garcia was considered one of Brazil’s top prosecutors at the time. In addition, according to Wiesenthal, German industrial circles were applying considerable pressure to Brazilian business circles to hinder the extradition.

Stangl was arrested in Sao Paulo on 28 February, 1967, and despite the efforts at resistance extradited to Germany. It would take another four years before he was sentenced by a court in Düsseldorf to life imprisonment. The ruling was “accessory to murder in 400,000 cases.”

Shortly after Stangl’s arrest, then VW chief executive Friedrich Wilhelm Schultz-Wink justified the employment of Stangl by saying, “In addition, Brazilian law forbids asking any questions of or collecting information on workers or employees.” In light of the collaboration with the Brazilian military and persecution of oppositional workers, it would be hard to make a more cynical statement. Incidentally, Schultz-Wink was himself a member of the Nazi Party.

The VW concern, together with the Social Democrat-Green government in Lower Saxony, has yet to comment on VW’s collaboration with the military dictatorship or the Stangl case.

What has been the response of the IG Metall trade union and the works councilors imbedded in VW? The answer is a stony silence. Neither the IG Metall nor the works council in Wolfsburg has taken a position on the matter. Not a single word of protest, no call to the VW board that it may wish to at least apologize for the criminal acts against Brazilian workers.

This feckless and subservient behavior of the trade union and works council can only surprise those who have a completely uncritical relationship with them or defend the union’s nationalist policies.

During a massive general strike in Brazil in 1979, which also included VW workers, a small delegation of VW workers from Sao Paulo visited Wolfsburg to confront the VW board of directors with the criminal machinations at VW do Brasil. One of them openly challenged then VW chief executive Toni Schmücker during a trade union conference in Wolfsburg city hall and reported on the collaboration between VW’s plant security force and the military dictatorship.

The VW board downplayed the situation and maintained a low profile, but IG Metall did not lift a finger. There is no indication of any solidarity rallies, and there is not even a record of notes of protest to the board of management. The current evasion by the trade union is a clear sign that IG Metall not only displayed a complete lack of solidarity with their Brazilian colleagues at the time, but also bore joint responsibility for their persecution.

Even now, when VW’s own company historian has been forced to confirm this grim episode, IG Metall and the works council stand behind company management to a man. Workers must draw far-reaching conclusions from this, and not only at VW. The huge crisis in the auto industry will spare no-one, and this will above all require a bitter struggle for jobs and wages, which can only be waged with a socialist orientation.

The example of the struggle by former VW do Brasil workers illustrates how workers confront a united front of company management, trade unions and the political establishment. The lawsuits filed by the former VW workers risk grinding to a halt without the workers having obtained justice or compensation. Without a global alliance of VW workers, which first and foremost demands a break with the pro-capitalist trade unions, the workers’ rights cannot be defended.



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