

VW colluded in torture of militant workers during military dictatorship in Brazil

Ludwig Weller
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The Volkswagen Group worked closely with the CIA-backed military dictatorship in Brazil, which held power in from 1964 to 1985, and collaborated in the persecution, torture and murder of militant autoworkers. That is the finding of an investigation of VW do Brasil, published by the Brazilian Federal Prosecutor's Office in mid-November.

The 406-page document produced by lead investigator Guaracy Mingardi is a damning exposure of the German-based auto giant. Not only does it confirm research published by broadcaster *NDR* and newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* last July, it also reveals much more. Mingardi concludes that "VW had an active role. It was not forced. The company took part because it wanted it that way."

VW do Brasil workers who were persecuted by the military junta have joined forces in the "Workers Forum for Truth, Justice and Reparation" (Fórum de Trabalhadores por Verdade, Justiça e Reparação). They filed a legal complaint on September 22, 2015, raising five allegations against Volkswagen do Brasil:

First, the company actively participated in the arrest of VW employees. Second, it harassed and dismissed oppositionist workers. Third, it aided and abetted the government in torture. Fourth, VW officials financially supported the Operação Bandeirante (OBAN) torture centre and the DOI-CODI (Departamento de Operações de Informações-Centro de Operações de Defesa Interna). Fifth, VW is guilty of conspiracy and participation in the military coup of 1964 and the two decades of military rule that followed.

The OBAN torture centre was established in 1969. A year later, it was renamed DOI-CODI and directly subordinated to the military. An estimated 2,000 people were imprisoned there, most without trial. At least 66 were murdered, 39 of them under torture.

The workers' charges have now been fully vindicated by the investigation.

Mingardi's research also confirms the statements of former VW employees Lúcio Bellentani and Heinrich Plagge that they were arrested by secret police at their

workplace under the supervision of armed VW plant security and taken to the DOPS torture centre.

Knowing that the federal prosecutor in São Paulo has been investigating VW since 2015 and would submit his findings in autumn 2017, the VW board in October 2016 commissioned historian Christopher Kopper, the son of former Deutsche Bank boss Hilmar Kopper, to investigate the case and submit his findings by the end of 2017.

This VW report was published last Thursday in São Bernardo do Campo. Originally, VW had hoped to stage a PR event with VW Human Resources Director Karlheinz Blessing personally shaking hands with torture victim Lúcio Bellentani. This did not happen, however, because workers refused to participate in the farce.

"None of the workers will appear at this event," Bellentani declared. "We will stand outside the factory gate expressing our dissatisfaction with the company's behaviour. So far, VW refuses to contact us officially." *Workers Forum* wrote in a letter, "Despite international reporting, VW has not commented on the allegations... During the various witness hearings, in which former employees reported repression by the VW plant security, the links to the repressive organs of the state and of torture and arrests, the VW lawyers remained silent... So far, there is no signal from VW that the company really wants to work with the investigators."

The VW Group apparently still believes it can escape any accountability.

In the press release published last Thursday, the VW board tried again to dodge responsibility. "Against the background of the scientifically evaluated sources, Professor Kopper concludes that 'cooperation between individual members of the Volkswagen do Brasil plant security and the Political Police (DOPS) of the former military regime has taken place. But no clear evidence has been found that the collaboration was based on institutional action by the company.'"

The company statement cites Kopper's assertion that a labour relations and cultural transformation began in 1979 when Volkswagen do Brasil became a pioneer of "employee

participation” by establishing a works council. By 1982, the historian claimed, the existence of the works council, democratically elected by workers in a secret ballot, meant that “union members were no longer disadvantaged,” Kopper asserted.

The company’s press release was reported by most German newspapers without mentioning, let alone quoting, the Brazilian investigator’s findings. But even the Kopper report admitted, “The management of VW do Brasil remained completely loyal to the military government and shared its economic and domestic policy goals.” In another place, it says that the chief of the plant security service, Adhemar Rudge, had acted “on his own initiative, but with the tacit knowledge of the board.”

The “tacit knowledge of the board” can only mean that VW corporate board members, at least of VW do Brasil, were well aware of and supported the factory security service when it handed over oppositionist workers for torture. In legal terms, this is called, at the very least, aiding and abetting the criminal acts of torture and murder.

The Mingardi report is even clearer. It quotes from a document of September 11, 1975, in which VW plant security chief Rudge describes in detail the procedure for the preparation and transfer of data to the intelligence agencies. “It clearly shows,” says Minardi, “that Volkswagen’s plant security organization coordinated things with [intelligence agency] SNI. And above all, that information about these processes was known on the part of the company director [Wolfgang Sauer].”

So, the question is not how much the VW board knew. The evidence on this is clear: all information about unionized and politically active workers first went across the table of company director Wolfgang Sauer. He decided what went to the secret police of the Brazilian military junta, and thus who was arrested and tortured.

Another revelation could have serious legal and financial consequences for the VW group. Mingardi proves that VW do Brasil had also financially supported the Brazilian military dictatorship. On page 63 of his review, he writes, “There is no doubt that there was real support from Volkswagen for the OBAN [torture centre] and maybe even for the [future torture centre] DOI-CODI.”

Kopper too had to accept this. While claiming, “There was no clear evidence to suggest that VW do Brasil materially supported the operation of an Army Torture Centre (DOI-CODI),” he admitted, “Indirect financial contributions through membership fees to the industrial association FIESP were just as possible as was the free provision of vehicles.”

Kopper explains elsewhere: “Since the FIESP industrial association actively supported OBAN, and VW was one of the largest members of the association, direct (through the

provision of vehicles) or indirect material support of the OBAN (via membership fees to FIESP) by VW do Brasil appears probable.”

Since almost all documents have been destroyed, evidence of the involvement of companies such as VW and wealthy individuals has long been concealed. It is well known that OBAN was financed, especially in its early days, by large donations from business figures in São Paulo. The average donation is said to have been \$100,000 a year. Just how much the Volkswagen Group contributed is still unknown.

VW is responsible for these crimes. Workers must demand that the company and German political officials who are responsible be held to account and that the former VW workers and all the surviving victims of the OBAN torture centre and their relatives be made as whole as possible.

Last week, business daily *Handelsblatt* reported there had been a willingness on the German side at VW to set up a Victim Support Fund for South America, comparable to the fund from which forced labourers under the Nazi regime were compensated.

But even this proposal, which would be largely for public relations purposes, has been resisted.

“[T]he idea from Germany met with little favour from South American Volkswagen colleagues,” continues *Handelsblatt*. “They warned against paying compensation in Brazil. ‘It will be boundless, Volkswagen will open the tap with that,’ the Brazilian management informed the head office in Wolfsburg. The financial consequences are incalculable.”

The article concluded, “The South Americans prevailed in the end; there will be no compensation fund for the time being.”



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