

# Skoda workers in the Czech Republic prepare to strike

Ulrich Rippert  
1 March 2018

At the end of last week the online magazine *automobil-produktion.de* reported on strike preparations at the three major Czech Skoda factories: Mlada Boleslav, Kvasiny and Vrchlabi. The main plant, Mlada Boleslav, is located near the capital Prague. Skoda belongs to the VW group, its factories in the Czech Republic are state-of-the-art and make an important contribution to the profits of the parent company.

According to the report, the union bargaining committee rejected a wage offer by management as a provocation and the Czech metalworkers' union Kovo then threatened the carmaker with an "unlimited strike."

The recent proposals from the employers' side were like a "slap in the face," said union representative Jaroslav Povsik after the fourth round of negotiations on Wednesday last week. Unless the corporate board made a much better offer, a major labour dispute was inevitable, he said.

At the beginning of the negotiations the union had demanded an 18 percent wage increase, and management then offered 14 percent, but with a 27-month term, which equates to less than 6 percent per annum. At the same time management demanded a very extensive flexibilization of the existing shift model with the aim of significantly increasing labour productivity.

The work pressure on employees is already very high. Last year, Skoda delivered a record number of vehicles, more than 1.2 million, an increase of 6.6 percent compared to the previous year. With a total of nearly 30,000 employees, Skoda manufactures the Octavia model in Mlada Boleslav.

Volkswagen is one of the largest employers and exporters in the Czech Republic. Within the VW

Group, the plant is considered one of the most modern and productive. In addition to VW-Skoda, Toyota, Peugeot Citroën and Hyundai are also produced in the Czech Republic. The corporations not only value the central location in the middle of Europe and the good infrastructure, but also the low costs, especially the low wages. Because of its many car factories, the Czech Republic is often referred to as the "Detroit of the East."

Last year, the metalworkers' union threatened to strike, but agreed a rotten compromise at the last moment. Even now, the union is trying to avoid a strike. But resistance in the workplace is constantly increasing and the union fears losing control.

According to the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), the wage gap between Western and Eastern Europe has increased significantly in recent years. On average, a Czech worker earns just one-third of what workers earn in Germany or Austria.

In addition, the inflation rate is increasing; last year, the official inflation rate tripled and is now at 2.4 percent.

The strike by drivers from the regional bus company in the Czech Republic last spring drew attention to the low wages that prevail in that country. Many drivers are forced to work at the minimum wage, which is just under 98 kroner (3.62 euros) for one hour of driving and 88 kroner (3.25 euros) for a waiting hour. Although allowances of about six kroner (22 euro cents) are added, this is a pittance given food prices, which are determined by German and French companies and do not differ from the Western price levels. Many workers must work 60, 70 or more hours a week and still cannot make ends meet.

The strike preparations at Skoda are part of a growing radicalization of workers in Eastern Europe, who are no

longer prepared to accept the extreme conditions of exploitation that have been enforced over the past two decades by German corporations in close cooperation with the EU.

In Slovakia, more than 8,000 workers went on strike at the VW plant in Bratislava in the early summer of last year, and finally settled with a pay rise of over 14 percent. In August, the workforce at the VW Palmela plant in Portugal protested against the planned introduction of Saturday working with a 24-hour strike. According to the union, a large part of the approximately 3,500 workers participated in the first strike since the founding of the plant in 1991.

The same month, in Poland, VW employees in Poznań set up a factory group (Workers' Initiative) of the Inicjatywa Pracownicza union in opposition to the Solidarność group. VW had fired three workers because they had exchanged messages on Facebook about the miserable working conditions and had announced the establishment of an alternative union group. According to *Labornet*, despite repression, the group in Poznań now has 300 members and an influx of younger workers and temporary workers, who make up around one-third of the country's approximately 10,000 VW employees.

At the end of December 2017, around 1,000 Ford workers launched a spontaneous strike in Craiova, south-eastern Romania, after the Sindicatul Ford Automobile Craiova union signed a deal with the company that involved a massive deterioration in working conditions. The agreement signed by the union was intended to freeze the salaries of long-term workers and reduce the wages of newly hired workers to levels below the minimum wage.

At that time, the *World Socialist Web Site Autoworker Newsletter* was received with great interest by the strikers. It wrote, "The transnational corporations have an international strategy to wage war against the working class. The workers must therefore develop their own international strategy to wage the class struggle to defend their interests. Isolated from their brothers and sisters around the world, the workers at Craiova are pawns in the hands of the multinational corporations and their union allies. But Romanian workers confront the same issues as their international co-workers, and united they possess a tremendous social power: the company's profits come from the

exploitation of their labor."

In view of the preparations for a strike at Skoda in the Czech Republic these words are highly relevant.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**