

On eve of strike deadline for 9,000 VW workers

## Mexican farmers blame Volkswagen for drought near assembly plant

Alex González  
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Local residents of the central Mexican state of Puebla have accused the German automaker Volkswagen of causing droughts near the company's assembly plant. The company started using hail cannons to supposedly disrupt the formation of hailstones in the atmosphere, aiming to protect the newly assembled vehicles that sit in outdoor parking lots. However, the devices have reportedly reduced precipitation in the area, threatening the agricultural production of over 100,000 people.

Residents in seven towns collectively demanded that the state and federal governments take action against the automaker. "The company is protecting their cars, their product, and we, the farmers of the region, with more than 100,000 inhabitants, are being harmed. The government is protecting the Volkswagen plant, which is a business, and they are hurting the population. ... Now the harvests in the region have been lost, and we don't have any hope, everything is dry because of a lack of water."

The Volkswagen assembly plant in Puebla employs over 13,000 workers and is the company's second largest in the world. The facility produces the Jetta, Beetle, Golf and Tiguan models from start to finish, from stamping to final assembly. Since the plant was built in 1967, it has produced over 11 million vehicles, with about 80 percent bound for the world market. Puebla is also home to over 80 auto parts companies, employing over 20,000 people.

The "anti-hail" devices, which the company started using in June, are deployed when there is a rain forecast and send loud and repeated sonic blasts every four to ten seconds until the storm has passed. There is no scientific evidence supporting the use of these devices to reduce hail stones. Critics point to the fact that thunder, a much more powerful sonic wave, is often found in the same storms that generate hail. The device's effect on precipitation is also unclear.

In June and August, farmers held protests and blocked access to the plants to demand that the company cease using hail cannons. The protesters are demanding the German automaker pay 73 million pesos (about US\$3.8 million) in compensation to be used for farming equipment, infrastructure development, reforestation and tools to fight against forest fires.

The state government initiated a "round table dialog" between the farmers and the automaker. The state affirms that Volkswagen was granted state permission to use these devices. Fearful of a social explosion, the state government has temporarily suspended the use of hail cannons until the National Water Commission (Conagua) issues a ruling over the effect of these devices.

"We continue having discussions with the automaker. The intention is to keep this social conflict from growing. There has been an official statement from Conagua in the sense that there is no official correlation between anti-hail devices and the general reduction of rain," said state official Rodrigo Riestra Piña.

Regardless of whether the devices affect rain patterns, the anger by farmers over the operations of the automaker has much deeper roots. Puebla is the third poorest state in Mexico, with six out of every ten residents living in poverty. Between 2010 and 2015, poverty increased by up to 25 percent in more than half of the state's municipalities. As the demands of the farmers makes clear, their concerns are bound up with a lack of social services and a precarious existence that can be threatened by a few months without rain.

Meanwhile, another battle is brewing with 9,300 workers who are in the midst of contract negotiations with the automaker. Volkswagen is offering only a 2.5 percent increase—a figure that amounts to a wage cut when considering that inflation reached 6.7 percent in 2017.

Volkswagen is determined to keep wages down as negotiations between Mexico, the US, and Canada continue over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), in which the auto sector has been a sticking point. The deadline to announce a strike is August 18.

The Volkswagen Workers Independent Union (Sitiavw), a tried and tested pro-capitalist union, has already repeatedly betrayed workers during contract negotiations. In 2017, during the last contract negotiations, the workers received a 6.5 percent raise. This was dubbed the largest raise in the union's history, but in reality the increase was entirely eaten up by inflation and was a little more than half of the 12 percent that the workers had originally demanded. Now, the union has climbed down to a 10 percent raise from its starting point of 13 percent.

To guarantee their demands for high wages and fully funded social services, autoworkers and farmers are each other's most natural allies. At the source of each respective struggle is the crisis of the capitalist system, which places profits above the needs of the working class, whether it be through attacks on wages or squeezing money from social services to pay for militarism and war. There is more than enough money to guarantee each worker a high standard of living. Volkswagen recorded over \$15.6 billion in profits in 2017, enough to give each of its workers a \$25,000 raise.

The Puebla autoworkers and farmers should not rely on the government or the nationalist trade unions, which are on the side of the corporations in every struggle. To achieve their demands against this transnational corporation, they too should form international links with workers all over the world. These new organizations—democratically elected rank-and-file committees—must unite workers across nationalities and backgrounds in a common fight to reorganize society based on human need, not private profit.



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