

US- and German-backed “independent” union at Volkswagen in Puebla, Mexico, imposes sellout deal

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Volkswagen and the so-called Independent Union (SITIAVW) were able to avert a strike and ram through a sellout contract that the nearly 7,000 workers at the Puebla factory in central Mexico were forced to vote on three times with no major changes.

After the “No” votes on August 9 and August 31, the contract dispute became a major political crisis for the ostensibly “pro-worker” Morena party of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), which worked nakedly to protect the company’s profits against the demands of workers.

On Monday, nearly 63 percent of workers reportedly voted “Yes” the third time around. The two-year contract includes a 9 percent wage increase and 2 percent more in benefits for the first year, and these will be renegotiated after one year. While official inflation reached 8.7 percent in August, the cost of staples rose 14.6 percent.

Before the latest raise, the average monthly wage at the plant was 16,481 pesos (\$820), but there are 22 tiers, starting as low as 35 pesos per hour (\$1.74) for technicians. While this is one of the highest paid automotive plants in the country, the lower tiers cannot even afford the weekly staples.

Workers clearly did not change their minds because of the one new condition in the third vote—a retroactive application of the nominal wage increases starting on July 20. Instead, they realized that the union could not be pushed to fight and was ganging up with management and the government against them.

The governor of Puebla, Luis Miguel Barbosa, a close ally of president Andrés Manuel López Obrador, brazenly intervened, claiming, “I’m going to get involved as state governor and on a personal basis with the clear intention of preventing the disruption of an important production source ... to avoid a strike from erupting.”

The conflict was evidently between the workers, on one side, and the company, the trade union and the state and

federal authorities on the other.

While the first two votes were clear democratic decisions by workers to strike and fight for actual improvements in their wages and conditions, the SITIAVW repeatedly expressed its “disappointment” at the rejection of its “historic” contract and agreed to extend its expiration, which legally constitutes the deadline to begin a strike.

Such extensions were openly encouraged by AMLO’s labor authorities, and Labor Secretary Luisa Alcalde hailed the vote Monday for “avoiding the conflict of a strike” and as an example of the “New Labor Model.”

Starting on September 3, right after the second “No” vote, the union allowed VW to order forced overtime to build up inventory and undermine a potential strike. At this point, it was clear that there were no negotiations taking place, and that the union was simply following the orders of management.

Ahead of the third vote, workers went on social media to express their anger. In a comment on the SITIAVW Facebook page liked by 36 readers, a worker named Victor wrote, “Why do you only communicate like this [social media posts]. Convoke an assembly and inform us personally. Neither the [union] committee nor the company have carried out a negotiation. The contract is the same. You are not even trying. ...”

Another worker, Jhon added, “If the strike was authorized and there is no agreement to what workers are asking for you must carry out what the law and the statutes say.” Guillermo wrote, “Carry out a joint general assembly with all departments. We can then work out the strategy to go back and negotiate with the permission of the rank-and-file.”

Alberto wrote in favor of voting “No” since “they are always starving us to get what they want. They try to fool us with a miserable retroactive payment which is gone just from the taxes for the annual bonus.”

No comments are to be found defending the contract and the only appeals for a “Yes” vote argued that workers will

not get any income during the strike.

In other words, most “No” and “Yes” votes on Monday represented votes of no-confidence in the union.

While workers are paid miserable wages, the state of Puebla has an official poverty rate of 62.4 percent, the third highest in the country.

Meanwhile, Volkswagen Group saw a 451 percent increase in profits in 2021, reaching \$21 billion. If this had been distributed equally among all VW employees globally, it would have more than quadrupled wages at Puebla.

The latest sellout contract follows years of stagnated real wages and, most importantly, the SITIAVW’s role in herding workers back into unsafe plants throughout most of the COVID-19 pandemic, only insisting that any reopening be approved by the government.

The first COVID-19 death of a Volkswagen worker at the plant, Ángel Ignacio M., 39, demonstrated the total indifference of the union to workers’ lives, much less their conditions. The union joined efforts by management to cover up the case. It insisted in a communiqué on April 4 that he had been “diagnosed with PNEUMONIA,” without even suggesting, like most corporate media reports, that his symptoms were consistent with COVID-19. He had tested positive on April 1, but the union remained quiet and played along with claims by management that no other employees were infected.

The struggle at Puebla can only be understood within the framework of the ongoing global wave of rejections of union-backed contracts. Driven primarily by inflation and the ongoing pandemic, and extending across all continents, this rebellion has the potential to mobilize billions and pose the question of which class controls society’s resources—the working class to meet social needs, or the capitalist class to maximize profits and wage wars.

The ruling class internationally is relying on the trade union bureaucracy to prevent an international, mass strike movement. In Mexico, US and German imperialism have been sponsoring and training so-called “independent” unions that are as subordinated to corporations and the government but not as discredited as the traditional, gangster-ridden Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM).

While its roots stretch back to the launching of the Puebla factory in the 1960s, the SITIAVW eventually left the CTM and became a leading force in the supposedly independent National Union of Workers (UNT). The UNT was being openly trained and cultivated by the Solidarity Center and Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), respectively financed by the US and German governments and tied to their respective union bureaucracies.

As the AFL-CIO switched its support from the discredited CTM to so-called “independent” unions that could be more

useful in suppressing the class struggle, one of the earliest programs of its Solidarity Center was training union officials in maquila factories in Puebla.

In the 1980s, the SITIAVW had already joined the Volkswagen World Council, a body dominated by the German IGMetall union, which preaches “positive unionism” based on “maintaining and creating new jobs” and claiming to oppose both “official unionism” and “radical unionism.” The SITIAVW would then join the International Metalworkers Federation (IndustriAll), even before the CTM had left it.

As the pandemic and the latest contract dispute showed, the imperialist-backed SITIAVW works as an appendage of the Morena administration.

At the same time, Morena and its allies in the AFL-CIO are also cultivating potential replacements for SITIAVW. Labor lawyer Susana Prieto, an adviser for unions backed by the AFL-CIO and a Morena legislator, said that she was holding discussions with a Union of Sindicalized Workers (PTA) at the Puebla plant which opposes the SITIAVW. She invited them to join her SNITIS union or build “a new union if the one you have does not represent you,” as reported by Milenio.

Any organization that takes root in bourgeois parties like Morena or imperialist bodies like the AFL-CIO and IndustriAll and their partners in Mexico will invariably be trained and paid to defend the capitalist interests of corporations and will isolate any struggle from other industries and countries.

To secure a truly independent alternative, it’s imperative that workers read and support the call to Mexican workers made by Will Lehman, a Mack Trucks worker, whose campaign for United Auto Workers president seeks to abolish the bureaucracy in the United States and internationally by building the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.



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