

Volkswagen workers in Germany oppose slash-and-burn cost-cutting plan

Our reporters
25 August 2023

On Wednesday, WSWs reporters spoke with workers at Volkswagen's main plant in Wolfsburg, Germany about the looming slash-and-burn cost-cutting scheme at the German car company. Under the "Accelerate Forward—Road to 6.5" agenda, profit margins are to be more than doubled and a strict savings and cutbacks program is to be imposed on all divisions. At stake are 30,000 jobs.

The VW Executive Board and Supervisory Board are working closely with the state government of Lower Saxony and the federal coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPD), Greens and liberal Free Democrats (FDP), with the support of the Group Works Council and the IG Metall union bureaucracy. As reported by the *World Socialist Web Site*, the latter has kept the workforce completely in the dark about the content of their consultations with management, which are being held behind closed doors. They intend to present the workers with a *fait accompli*.

But there is growing resistance within the workforce. Klaus* told a WSWs reporter: "There's no question about it: You're presented with a *fait accompli*. We don't get any information at all down here. Quite honestly, you get the feeling of having almost no influence on what's happening. It used to be a give and take. But today it's just take. The works councils and unions aren't what they used to be. ... Those who can, simply help themselves. That has to be changed. Let's get to it."

WSWS reporters spoke with workers about building independent rank-and-file committees, such as those already established at the German railroad company, in public services, at the postal service, and internationally in many other sectors, so as to counter the unions' systematic class collaboration with the employers. They distributed a leaflet warning against the mendacious

role of Daniela Cavallo, chairwoman of the general works council.

Arne, an older worker, said thoughtfully while reading the flyer, "Basically, these plans have been known for a long time. But you never get the details. It's really a conspiracy. The people at the top all communicate with each other. There are supervisory board members who don't only sit at VW but have seats on the chemical industry boards, too. They coordinate everything with each other. It's a whole different world. And not only that! The government is providing hundreds of millions of euros in subsidies to build VW factories in China. Where does the money go? Certainly not to the people who work there."

A WSWs reporter added that the German government is currently arming the military with hundreds of billions of euros and demanding that workers pay for it. In China, as in Germany, VW workers are exploited by the same family of owners, he said. Rank-and-file committees should unite workers of all nationalities and professions.

To this Arne replied approvingly. "That's right, everyone should be united—that's a nice thought. Decades ago, there was a campaign under the slogan: 'On Saturdays Daddy belongs to me!' Things were really happening. Even in the '80s, there was something like that, and it worked." Today, he says, it would be unthinkable for IG Metall to do anything of the sort.

Rank-and-file committees should consist of trustworthy colleagues and unite workers across all borders in a common struggle against this slash-and-burn. They must be composed of the most trusted workers and be independent of the trade union and works council apparatus. Their first task must be to fight the attempts of the works council and union to

divide the company workforce and to expose all of the secret negotiations with corporate management and the government.

“Exactly, no secret negotiations!” said an older production worker, who also expressed his deep distrust of the union bureaucracy. “It is not okay that you either don’t hear anything or hear it too late to do anything about it. And you can’t know if they’re negotiating in our interest or not. I have the impression that they just want to have their peace. They don’t care what happens to the rest of us. This is no longer the union that we had after the war...”

Another VW worker took a WSWS reporter aside to talk to him out of view of the surveillance camera, saying, “The works council is getting all of this. They look at who’s taking a flyer and make a note of it.”

Sonja, who has only recently started working in the plant’s canteen, also criticized the secret consultations between the works councils and management. “When something takes place in secret, it’s always strange and you know something isn’t right.” Rank-and-file committees, open to all employees of the Volkswagen Group, including subcontractors and service providers, “sound great to me,” she continued. “It’s the right thing to do. It’s one company: What applies to some should apply to all.”

Antonio (late 30s) also works in catering for the Group’s service company, Volkswagen Group Services, but wants to “move on as soon as possible, away from here.”

He said, “I haven’t heard about these plans yet. That would affect us too. When electric cars come, a lot of people won’t be needed here anymore, I expect. I think that is also the reason why the new factory was never built. I think a lot of people here feel safe and tell themselves they’ve got a job for life. But as you’ve seen in the last few years, nothing is certain in this life except death.”

Antonio was referring to the profit-before-lives policy of world governments that led to the coronavirus pandemic taking the lives of more than 20 million people. Another younger worker criticized the audacity with which Volkswagen and other major German corporations raked in unprecedented government subsidies during the height of the pandemic and then paid out billions in dividends to their shareholders.

As COVID-19 once again resurges, the war in

Ukraine continues, a conflict that has already killed hundreds of thousands of people on both sides and is being systematically fueled by the imperialist powers of the NATO alliance to bring Russia and Ukraine under Western control.

Oleksandra*, who comes from Ukraine and works as an intern at VW, spoke about her experiences.

“In Ukraine, corruption is omnipresent. My father is the owner of a small business, and as such he had to pay ‘bribes’ or protection money to authorities and the police in order to survive economically at all. When the war started, my mother and I fled abroad. It is not worth dying for this country and this government, we said to ourselves. But my father was not allowed to leave Ukraine, like all the other men. He tried to help in the civil defense so he wouldn’t be sent to the front.”

Oleksandra is critical of the policies of all the governments involved and said, “I also think that this war is about control and exploitation. You can’t compare the situation one-to-one with World War II—We have some rights today. But Ukrainian refugees are exploited here in Germany. Here in the company, for example, they only give me tasks that no one else wants to do and where I don’t learn anything. I worked in a startup before. I learned a lot more there.”

She has already started learning about the Nazi roots of the VW Group and the family that owns it. “I know that VW profited from forced labor during World War II. Polish and Belarusian people in particular were exploited here, and many died.”

The restructuring and slashing program will massively intensify exploitation at Volkswagen and put all the gains of past struggles at risk. We call on VW workers, regardless of nationality, union affiliation or occupational group, to contact us and start building rank-and-file committees to fight back against these imminent attacks.

** Name changed by the editors*



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact