

US and German-sponsored union at Volkswagen Mexico imposes sellout contract, blocking a global struggle

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The Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITIAVW) in Mexico rammed through a sellout agreement last Friday at the company's massive complex in Puebla, blocking a scheduled strike.

The 7,200 workers at the plant had rejected the contract on August 30 by a majority of 55.7 percent. The union leadership postponed the strike deadline and had workers vote on essentially the same contract on September 14, which included a meager 7 percent wage increase and a 3.59 percent raise in benefits, compared to the initial demand by the union of a 21 percent raise in pay.

The union spent the weeks between the votes attempting to demoralize workers. Hugo Tlalpan Luna, the recently elected general secretary of the union, told workers that there was no strike fund, which he blamed on corruption from the previous leadership, and argued that a struggle for a significant improvement in pay would have to wait.

Seeing that the new union leadership would act no differently from previous ones and instead would isolate any strike, starve workers on the picket lines and refuse to fight for significant improvements, 63 percent of the workers allegedly voted in favor on Friday. However, no confidence can be placed in the validity of the vote count overseen by bureaucrats eager to impose the contract without impacting the flow of dues money.

The new contract includes a promise to hire 321 new workers, which Tlalpan described as a sign of "job security." This is a lie to cover for the unwillingness of the union apparatus to truly safeguard workers' jobs and fight the massive increase in the workload for the existing workforce.

The first semester of 2024 saw a 30 percent increase in production to over 1,100 units per day, which includes the Jetta, Taos and Tiguan models. But, at the same time, a transition first announced in 2022 to the production of electric vehicles, which require a fraction of the labor hours compared to gasoline cars, could be used as an excuse for mass layoffs and increasing the workload even more.

The sellout of workers in Puebla exposed the treachery of not only SITIAVW, but also of the German and US union bureaucracies that have long sponsored its activities and those of the rest of so-called "independent" unions in the country.

While Tlalpan sat on his hands and blamed a lack of funds, IG

Metall in Germany and the United Auto Workers (UAW), who have hundreds of millions of dollars in funds, turned a blind eye.

On Thursday, IG Metall made no mention of Puebla as it announced a start of contract talks with Volkswagen a month ahead of schedule after the company ended a supposed "job security scheme."

The UAW waited until the morning after the sellout contract was ratified in Mexico to announce that it would begin negotiating its first contract ever with Volkswagen after workers at the assembly plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee voted to join the union earlier this year.

These talks are taking place amid an upsurge of struggles by workers in the company that could set the basis for a major counteroffensive in defense of jobs and for a massive improvement in conditions.

On September 4, workers at Audi, a Volkswagen subsidiary, in Brussels, Belgium, launched wildcat strikes to oppose threats to end production there of the Audi Q8 e-tron electric vehicles, to shift production to the plant in Puebla.

Earlier this year, in Puebla, the Independent Union of Audi Workers (SITAUDI) which belongs to the same federation and is closely tied to SITIAVW, sold out a three-week strike as well by having workers vote on essentially the same contract repeatedly. There was no effort to expand the struggle to the Volkswagen plant less than one hour away.

The unity of Volkswagen workers across Europe, North America and beyond would cripple the efforts of the company to pit them against each other in a race to the bottom. At the same time it would help undermine the promotion of chauvinism the ruling elites employ to advance their agenda of war and attacks on democratic rights.

For decades, the union bureaucracies of the United States, Canada and especially Germany have maintained close ties with SITIAVW, but the relationship has been entirely exposed as merely a means of doing the bidding of the corporations and imperialism.

The history of these ties at the plant in Puebla provides a case study of how the state, management and the union bureaucracies have worked to block workers from developing genuine fighting organizations of the working class.

A brief history of the SITIAVW

The corporatist Confederation of Mexican Workers (CTM), which was an appendage of Mexico's long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party, established a union at the plant as soon as it became Volkswagen de Mexico in 1966, with the personal intervention of Fidel Velázquez, who led the CTM almost continuously from 1941 until his death in 1997.

Velázquez maintained a close relationship with the US union bureaucracy and worked together to purge left-wing officials and unions across Latin America, particularly after hosting the offices of the CIA-financed Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT, acronym in Spanish) inside the CTM headquarters in Mexico City from its creation until 1989.

In 1972, President Luis Echeverría responded to growing opposition to the gangster-ridden CTM, particularly in the growing auto sector, by deploying his friend, lawyer Juan Ortega Arenas, who had established a parallel federation called "Unidad Obrera Independiente" (UOI). The lawyer advised a group of workers at Volkswagen that had successfully displaced the CTM local amid a corruption scandal. The new union was re-named SITIAVW and was immediately controlled by Ortega Arenas, working closely with Labor Secretary Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, despite falsely claiming to be "independent" from the PRI government. Using the Volkswagen and Nissan unions as a starting point, the UOI soon had 85 affiliated unions.

In late 1981, a faction of the SITIAVW backed by most workers drove out the secretary general of the UOI and broke with the federation. Volkswagen responded by firing the new leadership and 600 other workers. A strike broke out, with UOI deploying thugs to beat up picketers. The government intervened by overseeing an election, with the anti-UOI faction winning and being recognized by the company.

It was under this new administration that SITIAVW forged ties with IG Metall in Germany, which invited its leaders to visit Germany and witness the system of integration of the union and Works Councils into management. In 1987, after management sought to impose a brutal plan of mass layoffs and cuts to benefits, the union was compelled to strike for 57 days and organize demonstrations and road cuts. Workers in Germany defied their own union leadership to oppose the use of parts made in Mexico. The company had to shelve its plan in Puebla and agree to a 78 percent wage increase.

This episode in particular showed how unleashing the enormous international strength of VW workers requires breaking the control of the union apparatus.

In the 1990s, so-called "working groups" were established at the plant bringing together the union and management to oversee a restructuring program of firings and outsourcing, where delegates were in charge of enforcing company mandates. In 1995, a new leadership under a Unificación Democrática caucus was voted in and there was yet another change in 2000, but throughout this period the new leaders made constant concessions and justified them as necessary to avoid mass layoffs. This included the 12-hour, 4 x 3 schedules.

In 1997, SITIAVW joined other unions that were leaving the sinking ship of the CTM to found the Unión Nacional de Trabajadores (UNT), which it still belongs to today.

The AFL-CIO soon took the new federation under its wing. A UNT official told researcher Thomas Collombat "the AFL-CIO would later realize that it needed allies more representative of Mexican labor, leading US unions to support and work with the UNT as soon as it was launched." The UNT also joined ORIT and participated in trainings and events sponsored by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), a foundation affiliated with the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) that is financed by the German government.

During the 2000s, union leader José Luis Rodríguez Salazar joined the VW Global Works Council and the German-Ibero-American Network of the Auto and Metal Industries launched by IG Metall. Rodríguez Salazar explained that these international ties helped "refurbish the discredited image of the union," even as he celebrated government handouts to the company and imposed further concessions.

Most recently, in 2018, IG Metall and its associated "Global Union," IndustriALL, openly financed the former leader of SITIAVW, Rodríguez Salazar, to lead the establishment of a new Federation of Independent Unions in the Auto, Aeronautics and Tire Industries in Mexico, which was joined by SITIAVW, SITAUDI, Los Mineros and other unions sponsored by US, Canadian and German imperialism.

Today, these unions maintain corporatist ties—similar to those that characterized the CTM and PRI—with the ruling party Morena of outgoing President Andrés Manuel López Obrador and Puebla governor Sergio Salomón Céspedes, who applauded the SITIAVW's sellout. "I recognize in the union a prudent agent with conviction that seeks dialog and reaches agreements," he said.

The sellout in Puebla confirms the conclusion stated by the *World Socialist Web Site* in a recent analysis of the expansion of the intervention of the AFL-CIO and its Solidarity Center across Latin America:

"The fight against inequality, war, fascism and imperialist oppression today means rebelling against the entire union apparatus and building the International Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees."



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