

German VW Action Committee discusses how to prevent plant closures

Our reporters
7 October 2024

At the second meeting of the German VW Action Committee colleagues discussed and answered fundamental questions raised by workers. Questions ranged from an assessment of the current crisis at VW and in the entire automotive industry to the implementation of practical solidarity and the need to independently organize the VW workforce in all plants and countries.

“The VW Group’s top management is sticking to its cutback plans. According to the media, from two to five plants are on the block,” Dietmar Gaisenkersting said introducing the discussion. Just before, the news had come in that Porsche would not be placing any further orders with the plant at Osnabrück, Germany. Osnabrück will continue to produce the T-Roc convertible and two Porsche models until the start of 2026. Due to declining sales at Porsche—particularly in China—there will be no follow-up orders for Osnabrück’s former Karmann plant.

“This means that the smallest production plant in Osnabrück will have no further orders from the beginning of 2026,” Gaisenkersting explained. “This is definitely one of the plants that will have to be fought for.”

But the representative union, IG Metall, is not even hinting at a fight. It is trying to calm the workforce down and lull them to sleep. According to the union, the workforce should have faith in the negotiations of IG Metall and its works council and otherwise wait and see.

In the discussion that followed there was agreement that this was not an option and that immediate action was required. An intense discussion of how and why ensued.

A VW worker from Hanover, Germany reported on discussions with his colleagues about the current situation. “We have had a surplus of staff in our production since the T6, the VW panel van, was discontinued at the end of June or beginning of July,” he reported. The ID bus and the T7 are now being built. “But the sales figures have plummeted. So something has to happen.”

He and his colleagues believe that although the car market is currently weak, it will surely recover. “VW sold over 9 million cars last year and achieved an operating profit of 22

billion euros [just under €18 billion profit].” Even 2024 will probably not be much worse, he said. “I know that this is a serious situation, but I don’t think it’s that serious. Or that it is necessary to close plants.”

He and his colleagues locate the cause of VW’s crisis in the actions of management. “And I don’t just mean the mistakes relating to the ‘diesel issue,’ as we call it. My real problem is that the standard reaction of both the IG Metall and the Group managers is cutting staff instead of finding real solutions.”

In Hanover, there are rumors that they will return to a four-day week at the end of this year or early next year, as they did in the 1990s. The head of the works council, Daniela Cavallo, already suggested using this mechanism to organize wage cuts for the workers and personnel cost reductions for the Group. “But the four-day week will not be enough for the company,” he added.

Another worker emphasized that “we are not just facing a market crisis; there is currently huge competition between the different automotive companies around the world.” And this in turn is part of an international economic crisis in all sectors, he said.

“In this systemic crisis, everyone is fighting for a share of a dwindling market, and at cost to the employees,” added Gaisenkersting.

After an intensive discussion, there was agreement “that we are not dealing with an economic downturn, but with a real collapse.” That is “the insight that I have taken from this discussion,” concluded the worker from the Hanover commercial vehicle plant.

Another emphasized the importance of this assessment. “If you understand the extent of this crisis, then you also know that everyone is affected.” Then you can really organize solidarity, because then it becomes a practical necessity.

The current lack of solidarity among colleagues was another important point of the discussion. A worker from Wolfsburg, Germany, reported that everyone at his plant firmly believes that their plant will not be closed. It would probably affect others, Osnabrück, perhaps also Emden or

Zwickau. “That really scares me.”

Several workers reported that there was also no solidarity between the permanent employees and the temporary workers.

“And that would be the real question for me,” added one. “A lot of people pretty clearly understand the situation that there will be major cuts for employees. What can you do as an individual? What is the best way for me to proceed?”

Ulrich Rippert, honorary chairman of the SGP, explained that the Action Committee had been set up for this purpose. “We have to take the initiative to create this solidarity,” he said. The Action Committee exists to unite colleagues from all sites. “The union and the works council are not doing that; they are trying to divide workers wherever they can.” The Action Committee takes the basic stand: “An attack on one site is an attack on all.”

“We need to discuss this and other fundamental principles of workers’ solidarity with many of our colleagues and not give in,” said Rippert.

“How do we want to defend our jobs in Hanover if we don’t give a damn about the job losses of our colleagues at other sites?” asked Gaisenkersting. He explained that workers in Germany cannot stand alone against a group that operates 114 plants worldwide and is threatening to relocate production.

The worker from Hanover added that “it is important for a lot of the people I have spoken to to organize solidarity”; that “everyone should join forces and assert our interests against the company management.”

The interests of temporary workers at other plants and employees at suppliers must be taken into account, he continued. “We must also protect and support their rights. Because if we don’t stick together, if we don’t support others in need, then they will be gone and we will always end up weaker than before.” This understanding must be “conveyed and communicated to our other colleagues.”

Rippert concluded that this would only be possible as part of a fight against IG Metall and its works council. “They have deliberately created this lack of solidarity in the past decades. Their invocations of solidarity, which they like to proclaim on May Day, are hollow phrases with no concrete content.”

“There is opposition in the factories,” summarized Gaisenkersting. “But the opposition cannot yet express itself. The Action Committee must articulate this opposition and put it on a firm foundation from which the workforce can fight off attacks.”

He again emphasized the connection between the attacks at VW and the escalating war. “War is the continuation of economic war by other means,” he reminded the audience. Trade war and competition in the automotive industry have

their counterparts in wars. The major imperialist nations, above all the USA and Germany, are using military force to assert their economic and geopolitical interests; they are striving to redivide the world, for the third time, Gaisenkersting stated. “That’s why we always say that the fight to defend jobs must go hand in hand with the fight against war.”

The increase in production costs due to rising energy prices, the fall in real wages due to inflation, the social cuts because the ruling government coalition is spending every euro it can on armaments and war—these are all consequences of war and rearment, said Gaisenkersting.

Rippert added that the self-confidence of workers had to be rebuilt. The decades-long dominance of the trade union had essentially turned workers into supplicants. “We have to make it clear that nothing exists here that has not been created by us workers.”

Workers are not beggars, they have rights, Rippert emphasized. The right to work must be enforced. “That’s why we must make the defense of jobs at all plants under all conditions a principle. When employers or their trade union lackeys tell us that this is not possible, they are only saying that their social system, which is based on profit, is at an end and no longer works.”

This is also how one should respond to colleagues who say that “communist times” are supposedly over. Those times are not over; they are highly contemporary. “Gone are the days of the GDR (East Germany) and the late Soviet Union. Gone are the days of Stalinism, the dictatorship that existed in these countries,” says Rippert. That was not socialism and certainly not communism.

These historical questions and the experiences of the labor disputes at Opel in Bochum, Germany and Ford in Saarlouis, Germany could only be briefly addressed. These topics will be taken up again in the next meetings.

All participants at the meeting were highly motivated to make the Action Committee better known among VW employees. The worker from Hanover announced that he would personally campaign for an alternative to IG Metall among his colleagues. “After this evening, after these talks, a little more forcefully,” he added.

The next meeting is on October 15 at 7 p.m. German time. Send a WhatsApp message to the mobile number +491633378340 and register using the form below.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact