

“We are being sold out.” German VW workers blast union betrayal as auto plants are sacrificed to rearmament drive

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In Wolfsburg, members of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) and the VW Action Committee distributed a leaflet headlined, “Enough is enough—Defend every job at Volkswagen!”

The early shift streamed out of the plant, the midday shift streamed in. Workers stopped, took the leaflet, and used the shift change for brief, hurried exchanges. Some read the first lines as they walked. Others pocketed the leaflet and then came back to make a remark.

The unrest among the workforce is palpable. The VW executive board is determined to eliminate tens of thousands of jobs and close several plants. While the government and corporations pour billions into rearmament and war, wages in the automotive industry are to be cut and entire workforces laid off.

“Now they’re closing four of them”

Many workers were particularly outraged by the broken guarantee to spare the plant. Marco, an older employee who has worked at the plant for over 20 years, said:

Back then, at the meeting, they said no site would be closed. Now they’re closing four of them and acting as if it fell from the sky. And the IG Metall union co-signed that. They’ve known for months what’s coming for us, and they kept quiet until everything was signed and sealed. We are being systematically silenced until the decisions have long been made.

A female worker, Sabina, responded to a worker’s remark that IG Metall was “doing something” with bitter irony:

Yes, they are doing something—namely, selling us out.

They agreed to the elimination of tens of thousands of jobs together with the executive board, and now they act as if they are our saviours. I don’t believe a single word they say anymore. Not one.

Temporary workers feel particularly unprotected. Thomas, who is employed at the plant through a temp agency, described the situation:

The works councils of the temp agencies say nothing. Absolutely nothing. We are the first who are supposed to be thrown out, and nobody talks to us. Decisions are made over our heads. I don’t even know if I’ll still be here next month. Nobody gives us any information.

Several younger colleagues and temporary workers confirmed this experience. They would be the first to go, but the last to be informed.

Karl, who previously worked as a bus driver, drew a comparison that immediately struck a chord with several bystanders:

I was a bus driver for over 20 years. Then they privatised all the buses in this region—and Verdi did nothing. Not a finger. It’s exactly the same now with IG Metall. The unions are always on the side of the companies, and we are the ones who have to foot the bill.

Others reported similar experiences: privatisations and outsourcing had always been accompanied by the promise that everything would be done in a “socially compatible” manner—while jobs disappeared and the union explained to the employees why they had to accept it.

“Yesterday they still said there are no plans”

New press reports that VW intends to sell models developed in China in Europe in the future, and possibly have them manufactured in plants such as at Zwickau were the dominant topic in many conversations. Several workers had read the news on their phones during their breaks.

“Yesterday they still said there are no plans to build China models here, and today it says Zwickau or other plants are to be used for that,” said Rheinhardt, an assembly worker. “So what applies now? Every new ‘rescue concept’ ultimately means only that somewhere else cuts are made, production is shifted, or a plant is shut down. They are systematically playing us off against each other—Zwickau against Wolfsburg, German workers against Chinese workers. And while we are squabbling among ourselves, they continue to cut jobs.”

Others asked how one could talk about “new opportunities” when staff were being cut and plants were being called into question at the same time. The suspicion that these scenarios were primarily intended to legitimise further job cuts was widespread among the workers at the gate.

“The same production lines for tanks”

The SGP leaflet highlighted the connection to the war economy. While the government has approved the largest rearmament programme since the Second World War, workers are supposed to pay for it through job destruction and wage cuts. One worker summed up this connection succinctly:

They talk everywhere about “war-readiness.” But what does that mean for us? That they close our plants, send us into unemployment and convert the same production lines for tanks and military technology. They take the billions for rearmament out of our pockets—through job cuts, wage cuts, cuts to social services. And IG Metall goes along with it.

In fact, reports from business daily *Handelsblatt* and the Prognos Dual-Use Atlas show that large parts of the automotive and supplier industry are already designated as dual-use sites for both civilian and military production. The very same corporations that are cutting jobs and suppressing wages today are to profit from arms contracts tomorrow.

“Workers in other countries have the same problems”

The SGP members’ explanations about the international networking of action committees met with great interest. Many workers heard for the first time that in the US an ordinary worker, Will Lehman at Mack Trucks in Pennsylvania, is running as a socialist candidate in the presidential election of the autoworkers’ union, UAW, and explicitly linking his campaign to the establishment of action committees in order to abolish the union bureaucracy and transfer power to the workforce. The fact that workers in Germany, the US, Mexico, Poland, Turkey and China are confronted with the same attacks and are joining together in the International Workers’ Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) was new to several employees and was immediately understood as a necessary response to the global strategy of the corporations.

“The corporations are also organising internationally,” said one worker. “VW, Stellantis, Mercedes, Toyota, Tesla—they are all doing the same thing: cutting jobs, suppressing wages, closing plants. If we fight only nationally they play us off against each other. Workers in other countries have the same problem. Why shouldn’t we join forces?”

The Volkswagen Action Committee draws a clear conclusion from this: The fight against job cuts, plant closures and wage cuts cannot be left to those who have co-negotiated these measures. Employees must build their own democratically controlled combat organisations, action committees, independent of IG Metall and the works council, which unite with colleagues in all VW plants across the entire automotive industry worldwide. The alternative to the capitalist profit and war system is for the working class to take control of production and organise industry as part of a democratically planned socialist economy that serves not the profits of a small minority, but the needs of the great majority.



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