Union election at Audi and contract vote at Volkswagen in Puebla, Mexico amid mass layoffs

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2 October 2026

At the last minute, the Independent Union of Volkswagen Workers (SITIAVW) called off a strike set for Friday, October 2, at the Volkswagen complex in Puebla, Mexico, and brought a new tentative agreement to a vote.

The deal provides a 3.8 percent direct wage increase for 2026, less than the 4.3 percent that workers rejected by 4,327 votes to 1,598 on September 11. The union claims it includes a "guarantee" that the 611 workers laid off when VW eliminated the third shift on the Jetta and Tiguan lines in August will be rehired.

This "guarantee" is worthless: workers have no organization of their own to enforce it, and the company is moving aggressively in the opposite direction. VW will halt Taos production for a week, *La Jornada de Oriente* reported Friday, and the more than 3,000 workers laid off at suppliers are not covered.

At the Audi plant in Puebla, César Orta Briones was reelected on Thursday to lead the Independent Union of Audi Mexico Workers (SITAUDI) until 2032. He won 1,040 of 3,180 votes cast, less than a third. None of the five slates, which campaigned with parties, raffles and cumbia concerts, had a program to stop the wave of job cuts.

The union's base fell from 4,159 workers in 2024 to 3,752 this year, a loss of 407 jobs that *Diario Cambio* described as carried out "in silence." In June, SITAUDI pushed through a 4.6 percent direct wage increase, compared with its initial demand of 15 percent.

These events are part of a global assault by the Volkswagen group, which includes Audi. On September 3, IG Metall union representatives on VW's supervisory board in Germany voted for another 50,000 job cuts, bringing the total in that country to 75,000. Business outlets have reported plans for up to 100,000 cuts worldwide.

The fight against layoffs is a central issue facing VW workers in Mexico, Germany and beyond. In Puebla, both unions were sponsored by IG Metall and its "global union" IndustriALL, and are working to isolate the struggle at each plant and impose the company's demands. The history of the Audi union, as told to the *World Socialist Web Site* by a former worker, shows that any serious struggle requires a break with this entire apparatus.

The history of SITAUDI

Puebla won the Audi plant with lavish handouts. Between 2012 and 2014, the state government of Rafael Moreno Valle granted Audi 8.35 billion pesos (US$ 635 million in 2012) in benefits, including 460 hectares of land, a 12-year tax exemption and a training center paid for with public funds.

Eduardo Badillo Cortés, a former worker and then union official at the bearing maker SKF, entered Audi in 2016 through one of the state-funded training scholarships. SITAUDI, registered in 2014, was not formed by Audi workers, Badillo explains. The faction of José Antonio Flores Trejo, then general secretary of the SITIAVW, installed its interior secretary, Álvaro López Vázquez, as SITAUDI's general secretary. The first 35 hires signed the founding documents and powers of attorney before leaving for training in Germany.

When they returned, they were made to sign resignations, and their posts went to Trejo's people. Later hires were told to sign a membership form or not be hired. Orta, a divisional secretary in the paint shop at VW, took the same post at Audi. Citing his term as general secretary until 2032, Badillo said, "That would be 28 years that the man has not touched the line."

Workers had been promised wages and benefits on a par with VW. For a year and a half they received nothing beyond base pay, and they never saw their union leaders. "They would say, 'the union people came at night.' And those on the night shift were told, 'they came in the morning.'"

On April 7, 2017, workers organized a walkout through WhatsApp groups to demand an assembly and an accounting of their dues. Only a few dozen gathered outside at first. Then German workers on assignment at the plant intervened, Badillo explained:

> These German workers would arrive at the lines and see people and say, "What are you doing here? Go out and support your co-workers!" When people said, "No way, they'll fire us, there will be consequences," in several places the German workers told them, "Yes, there will be consequences for those out there. But if everyone unites and fights for their rights, for what is just and valid, there will be no consequences. They can't fire all of you. So go out and support your co-workers."

The German workers were paid several times what Mexican workers earned, which was 1,300 to 1,500 pesos a week (US$73–84). In practice, this gap served to divide the workforce. The human resources director had to phone the general secretary, whom no worker had ever

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seen, to go outside and meet the strikers. The leadership held the promised assemblies inside the plant, then canceled the buses to transport workers there. A profit-sharing payment of 15,000 pesos (US$823) ended the movement, and Badillo was forced out later that year.

The fate of SAUTAM

After the 2019 labor reform allowed more than one union per plant, Badillo began organizing a rival union with workers inside. He approached several established unions for support, but every apparatus sought control or money. The CROC's Iván Hernández wanted to be general secretary. The SITIAVW leader wanted it as "an annex" of the VW union. A CONLABOR leader said the registration could be obtained, "but money has to be paid."

Workers finally accepted support from the CATEM federation, founded by Morena legislator Pedro Haces. Rey David García, a former SITIAVW secretary, put Badillo in contact with CATEM. The result was the Authentic Union of Audi Mexico Workers (SAUTAM), registered in March 2023. However, as soon as a group of workers was selected for its leadership, CATEM began making the decisions, destroying any semblance of democracy. According to Badillo, no constituent assembly was held and signatures were forged. SAUTAM never mobilized workers and today represents a few dozen.

The 2024 strike and the VW contract

Pressure from below forced SITAUDI to strike on January 24, 2024, after workers twice rejected offers backed by the union. But SITAUDI provided no strike pay and made no effort, not even an appeal, to extend the strike to VW or the suppliers. After struggling for nearly four weeks in isolation, workers accepted a 7 percent direct raise to wages, against their demand of 20 percent. That defeat explains June's vote this year, in which workers accepted an even smaller increase because they had no confidence that the union would wage a genuine struggle for more.

The SITIAVW uses the same methods. In 2024, it made workers vote again on a contract they had rejected, claiming there was no strike fund. This year it has postponed the strike five times now, as workers demanded to know what was being negotiated in their name. It has now returned with a lower direct wage increase than the one they rejected and a promise it is unwilling to enforce.

Both unions belong to the Federation of Independent Unions of the Automotive Industry (FESIIAAAN), founded in 2018 with funding from IG Metall and IndustriALL. Recently, Sabine Kiefer, IG Metall liaison for the Audi works council in Ingolstadt, visited the town of San José Chiapa in Puebla to meet with Orta and Audi Mexico's new head of human resources.

For rank-and-file committees and international unity

VW workers in Germany have drawn conclusions from this experience. On September 21, the VW Action Committee, part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), issued a program calling for the defense of every job and a break with the control of the union apparatus. It wrote:

> The fight against global corporations that pursue an international strategy cannot be won within a national framework. Every concession by the unions in one country encourages the corporations to intensify their attacks worldwide. That is why we counter the nationalism of "defending individual plants"—with which the union bureaucrats play workers in one country off against their colleagues in other countries—with the international unity of the working class.

The committee calls for "independent action committees elected by the workers themselves, accountable to the workforce and free of full-time union officials." It demands that no agreement be signed without rank-and-file discussion and a vote, and that layoffs be halted through the introduction of shorter hours with no loss of pay.

In 1987, during a 57-day strike in Puebla, German workers defied their own union leadership in solidarity, and VW shelved its layoff plan. The 2017 Audi walkout and the committee elected afterwards showed the same potential.

Workers at VW, Audi and the suppliers in Puebla should form their own rank-and-file committees, independent of every so-called "independent union" and the official confederations. They should reject the SITIAVW deal, fight for the immediate reinstatement of every laid-off worker as non-negotiable, set a list of demands for what they need—not what the company says is possible—and link up with their co-workers in Germany, Belgium, the United States and beyond through the IWA-RFC to win those demands.

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