

Audi CEO Döllner assists Trump's election campaign

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Audi CEO Gernot Döllner's campaign appearance with President Donald Trump has provoked outrage among workers at the Volkswagen Group. And rightly so. Döllner's appearance is neither a slip-up nor "pragmatism", but an expression of the fact that the German bourgeoisie is preparing to collaborate with fascism—in the US as in Germany. Meanwhile, the IG Metall union is criticising Döllner for championing American rather than German jobs.

On Saturday evening, Döllner took to Trump's campaign stage in the US state of Georgia after Trump had delivered one of his notorious racist and fascist harangues. "Make America Great Again—made by Ingolstadt!" writes the business weekly *Wirtschaftswoche*, referring to the city where Audi is headquartered and has its main plant.

Polls ahead of the midterm elections on November 3 show that rarely has a president been so hated as Trump. Only 31 percent of Americans support his handling of the presidency, which has been defined above all by the persecution, imprisonment and deportation of workers by the immigration Gestapo ICE. Almost 70 percent reject his economic policy, which enriches the super-rich and corporations while ruining working people through social cuts and price rises. The poll figures express the social outrage of the working class. This outrage will not end with the elections; it must and will turn into a struggle against both capitalist parties, Democrats and Republicans alike.

In this situation, Döllner announced he would build an Audi factory in the hotly contested "swing state" of Georgia for \$4 billion, around €3.6 billion. There, 4,500 workers are to produce 200,000 vehicles a year of the large SUV models Q7, Q8 and Q9. "We believe in the American market," Döllner declared next to Trump. Audi was taking advantage of the "fantastic opportunity" to build the "biggest and most premium" SUVs in Georgia. "This is a long-term investment," he assured, adding, "Thank you, Mr President, for your support and this great opportunity."

As the protests swelled, the VW Group, which owns Audi and is led by CEO Oliver Blume, initially denied having known about Döllner's appearance in advance. A company spokesperson has since confirmed that Blume was informed of the possible appearance. VW's chief lobbyist, Thomas Steg, was also in the loop.

According to *Wirtschaftswoche*, an analysis of flight data from VW's private jet fleet also suggests that the appearance was preceded by "intensive negotiations with the US government."

The magazine writes, "Data from the VW aircraft fleet show frantic activity in the run-up." An unusually large number of company jets have landed in Florida and Washington in recent weeks.

The attempts by the company and Döllner to play down and justify the campaign appearance have enraged auto workers. According to news weekly *Der Spiegel*, VW disabled the comments function beneath the intranet post, "Audi plans first US production site in Georgia," and deleted comments that had already been published. The post had received more than 200 contributions within two days, in which workers gave vent to their anger. Now the page reads, "The discussion under this article has gone beyond the bounds of an objective exchange of opinions and no longer stayed within the terms of use of the Group Wiki and the works agreement 'Partnership-based conduct in the workplace'."

While workers are reminded of rules of conduct, company rules evidently do not apply to managers once profits are at stake. These rules oblige them to observe "neutrality in dealings with [political] parties and interest groups" and to refrain from "publicly visible appointments with parties/politicians standing for election" in the three months before an election.

The central warning to VW workers and the entire working class, however, is this: The company is making common cause not with just any president, but with one who is terrorising his own population and plunging the world into genocide and war. Trump admires Adolf Hitler and imitates his policies. Next year he wants to pour \$1.5 trillion into the war budget, while supposedly there is no money left for vital social programmes on which tens of millions of people depend.

Under Trump, the US is financing Israel's genocide of the Palestinians, and he has repeatedly threatened Iran with "total annihilation." Tens of thousands of US workers have been abducted from their jobs and homes, locked up and deported. More than 70,000 people are currently being held in inhumane conditions in ICE's concentration camps.

In Germany, companies, politicians and the media are declaring that Audi and Döllner had no other choice. Until now, they say, Audi has imported all vehicles for the US market from Europe or Mexico. The tariffs that were introduced and passed on to US buyers have cut sales there by 16 percent in this year alone. Audi therefore needs a US plant, the argument runs. Döllner travelled to Georgia with production board member Gerd Walker for negotiations and stated that the company had accepted the

campaign appearance “exclusively in the interests of the company.”

The media support is broad. Detlef Esslinger writes in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that the “appearance by the Audi chief was certainly the opposite of stylish.. But, he adds, “his critics are making it too easy for themselves.”

Holger Ohmstedt argued even more bluntly on TV news show *Tagesthemen* that Döllner had had no choice because “Audi’s back is against the wall... Corporate mission statements and rigorous professions of virtue unfortunately do not sell a single car.” The “coolly detached pragmatism of business management” helped more. If Audi were followed in a few years by BMW and Mercedes, which, like VW, already produce in the US, there would be “a small chance that plants and workers in Germany will benefit more from it than the campaigner Donald Trump.” After all, Trump would be in office for only “817 days” more, less than two and a half years.

The public broadcaster’s commentator conceals that Trump and his government are currently preparing to annul the midterm elections. Nor is he troubled by Trump’s repeated announcements that his election as president had been the last of its kind. Moreover, the cause of Trump’s rise is the crisis of American capitalism, and the danger of fascism does not disappear with the person of the president. But that does not interest Ohmstedt. Instead, he polemicises against “the German left,” which uses “the kowtowing in Georgia as an occasion for mockery and derision” and even “draws parallels with the National Socialist [Nazi] past of parent company Volkswagen.”

These parallels are obvious. Anton Piëch ran the Volkswagen main plant in Wolfsburg from 1941 to 1945. Its foundation stone had been laid by his father-in-law, Ferdinand Porsche, together with Adolf Hitler on May 26, 1938. The family clan’s multibillion-euro fortune today goes back to its collaboration with the Nazis. Also noteworthy is the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*’s remark that Döllner’s name always comes up first when a successor to Blume is sought, should Blume “fall out of favour with the Porsches and Piëchs.”

If Döllner, Audi, VW and the entire media landscape already present collaboration with Trump as the only option today, they will say the same of collaboration with a federal government led by the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). After all, “professions of virtue” do not sell cars, as Ohmstedt puts it.

The trade union apparatus will not oppose this logic. The General German Trade Union Federation (ADGB), predecessor of today’s German Trade Union Confederation (DGB), opposed the Nazis only until they came to power. On May 1, 1933, it called on workers to march under the swastika. The next day, the Nazis stormed the trade union offices and confiscated their assets. These were subsequently used to set up Volkswagen, which ultimately benefited the Porsches and Piëchs.

Today, leading IG Metall officials are providing the nationalist accompaniment to Döllner as the auto industry is restructured. Horst Ott, IG Metall’s district head for Bavaria, who has agreed to the elimination of 8,000 jobs and further cost-cutting at Audi, has demanded that the future viability, capacity utilisation and job security of the existing sites be given top priority. “Investing in the

US and wholesale cuts in Germany—that doesn’t fit together,” he said.

IG Metall head Christiane Benner said something similar on public broadcaster ZDF’s *Morgenmagazin*: “Investments are being announced there while workers here fear for their jobs.” She would press “that we get prospects from the board for the sites and also for the Neckarsulm site.”

IG Metall’s “defence of German jobs” is not a defence of workers, but a defence of the competitive position of German capital—that is, exactly the same logic that leads to fascism and war.

That is why Benner, VW Group works council chair Daniela Cavallo and all the other IG Metall representatives on the VW supervisory board approved Blume’s future plan at the beginning of September. It includes numerous cost-cutting measures, in particular the destruction of a further 50,000 jobs at VW, Audi, Porsche and other subsidiaries, as well as the closure of three plants from 2030, including Audi in Neckarsulm, with more than 15,000 workers.

The suggestion from sections of IG Metall and the media that construction of the factory in Georgia is still uncertain for want of a supervisory board resolution is intended to placate workers. The supervisory board, including the so-called “employee representatives,” will approve if the plant promises to make a profit. Cavallo has already stated that, purely in business terms, it could make sense.

Also “commercially sensible” in Cavallo’s reading are the cutback programmes with which at least 100,000 jobs at the VW Group are being destroyed. The same goes for the conversion of the auto industry to a war economy. At the VW plant in Osnabrück, Israeli arms company Rafael is to build parts for Israel’s Iron Dome air-defence system, which Cavallo calls a “future prospect for Osnabrück.”

Just as IG Metall and its works council representatives support the cutback programmes and the conversion of the auto industry to a war economy, so too will they advocate collaboration with fascists and dictators.

The defence of jobs and the fight against fascism and war are one and the same. The nationalism of the trade union apparatus must be countered by the international unification of the more than 650,000 VW workers. The workers in Georgia are the allies of auto workers in Germany in the coming struggles.



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