

As VW announces first EV conversion plans, IG Metall union prepares to implement them

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On Friday, German auto giant Volkswagen's board of directors and the IG Metall [metalworkers union]-dominated works council revealed information for the first time about which electric models are to be built in which plants. With this early release of information, the company and the works council are reacting to growing unease and unrest in the workforce at the individual VW locations. Originally, the exact plans were only to be announced after the planning round, which traditionally takes place in November.

It is now clear that the planned "Trinity" plant in Wolfsburg, which was to be rebuilt there by 2026 in the style of a Tesla Gigafactory for two billion euros, will not be constructed.

VW bosses and their co-managers from the IG Metall union and works council have decided on an extensive reallocation of the plants. Thus, new electric models, such as the successor to the ID.3 [battery electric small family car], or a newly designed electric Golf, are to be built at the main plant in Wolfsburg. This was announced by the head of the general works council, Daniela Cavallo, who also chairs the local works council at the Wolfsburg main plant. The catch: the new E-Golf will not be on the market for five years. Until then, the ID.3 and the Tiguan electric SUV planned for 2026 are to be produced at the plant, alongside the combustion models that are being phased out.

It is highly questionable whether the plant will be working at full capacity until 2029, when the employment protection guarantees expire. The board of directors and the works council did not say how many jobs would be cut by 2029 and beyond.

The "Trinity" plant, which was hailed as a showcase project, is now to be built in Zwickau. The successor to the Audi Q4 e-tron is also to be built there. What might initially sound positive to VW employees in Zwickau, however, also has a catch: these two models will also not be able to be built for another five years, because the new SSP electric platform will not be ready for use before the end of the decade.

This is the context in which the board's decision to end three-shift operations in Zwickau must be seen. Last week, VW terminated the 30-year company agreement for three-shift operations at the end of the year. A spokesperson simply stated that the aim was to reach a new agreement "that would take into account the current market situation and ensure the economic viability of the site."

VW workers told the WWSW that this news hit them like a thunderbolt, and many were now worried about their jobs. Especially since a week before, almost 270 temporary workers were told that their expiring contracts would not be renewed, and that the remaining 2,200 temporary workers also had to fear the same. In addition, it became known on Tuesday that VW will shut down production at both the Zwickau plant and the Dresden glass manufacturing plant for a fortnight at the beginning of October. One production line will be shut down completely.

The company agreement on three-shift operations, which has now been terminated, was concluded with IG Metall in 1991. The elimination of a night shift after more than 30 years is a clear indication of the depth of the restructuring plans. The VW plant in the Mosel district of Zwickau has been converted into a solely electric vehicle factory in recent years, at a cost of 1.2 billion euros [\$US1.3 billion], and employs about 10,700 people.

Zwickau, in the eastern state of Saxony, is considered a cradle of German car manufacturing. Cars have been manufactured there since 1904. The founder was automobile pioneer August Horch. For legal reasons, he changed the name of his "August Horch Automobilwerke," and from 1915 called it "Audiwerke AG Zwickau," a play on the fact that "Audi" is the Latin translation of the German word "Horch [listen]."

In 1932, the four Saxony automobile companies, Audi, DKW, Horch and Wanderer, then merged, under the name Auto Union--symbolised by the four rings of today's Audi. After the Second World War and with the founding of the German Democratic Republic [GDR, Stalinist East Germany], Auto Union moved parts of its operations to the West and later continued production under the Audi brand at its present headquarters in Ingolstadt.

When production of the East German "Trabi" was stopped after German reunification in 1990, the VW group snatched up the traditional Zwickau car plant with its highly skilled but underpaid workers. VW also used this "location advantage" in Chemnitz and Dresden after reunification. With the help of IG Metall, thousands of industrial jobs were first destroyed, and then the collectively agreed wages were kept below the level in the West, even until the present.

In an information flyer, the works council feigns “outrage” at the termination of the company agreement. “This action anticipates the planned negotiations on driving patterns for the rest of 2023 and for 2024.” It says the elimination of a shift meant: “1. the elimination of the 30-minute paid break” and “2. the elimination of the night shift supplement.”

The IG Metall and works council are not outraged about the drastic job cuts that the elimination of one shift means. Rather, they are complaining that the termination of the company agreement was too hasty, even though there was agreement. Does the works council seriously believe it can deceive the workforce with this sleight of hand?

We have already shown in a September 19 article how the secret collaboration between VW board, IG Metall bureaucrats and state governments is tantamount to a conspiracy against the VW workforce: “The IG Metall is significantly involved in the development and implementation of the concrete plans for the cuts at VW.”

All fundamental decisions on corporate strategy, as well as on plants and models, are made in the supervisory board presidium. The most important representatives of the major shareholders and the union sit there: the chairman of the supervisory board, Hans Dieter Pötsch; the two heads of the VW family clans, Dr. Hans Michel Piëch and Dr. Wolfgang Porsche; as well as Lower Saxony’s Minister President, Stephan Weil (Social Democratic Party, SPD), for the state government, which owns 20 percent of VW shares. From the side of IG Metall and the works council, the current members are IG Metall boss Jörg Hofmann; chairperson of the general and group works council Cavallo; the chairperson of the general works council of Audi, Peter Mosch; and Gerardo Scarpino, managing director of the VW group works council.

Scarpino took over the position on the supervisory board presidium from Jens Rothe in April this year. He was chairman of the VW works council in Zwickau and the central works council in Saxony until February 2023—and is now head of human resources at VW in Dresden.

The decisions taken in this supreme body are then enforced by the thousands of company IG Metall representatives. The current info-sheet of the IG Metall shop stewards at the Volkswagen plant states that works council reps, company representatives and shop stewards have “always discussed workplace measures closely with management [...] in recent years.” “This is exactly how it must continue with the efficiency programme that is now imminent. Only in close cooperation and with a common approach can Volkswagen, together with the works council and IG Metall, successfully work through the tasks ahead.”

In this context, the IG Metall shop stewards do not even try to conceal what all the “job measures” were about: “job cuts,” and this is also the case with the new performance programme “ACCELERATE FORWARD | Road to 6.5,” where 6.5 stands for the targeted tripling of the profit margin at the core brand

VW. Stefan Stolzenburg, a member of the shop stewards body, is quoted at length as having “taken a stand” at the last works meeting. In reality, he requested of the VW management: “Take us along with you as a workforce on the path of transformation. Actively involve us as staff, shop stewards and works council reps. Our colleagues are the specialists on the ground.”

This once again confirms the WSWS assessment of the role of IG Metall in general and its representatives at VW in particular: “In no other German company is the collaboration between management and trade union as sophisticated as at Volkswagen. With an army of full-time functionaries, IG Metall and the works councils ensure that the group’s decisions are implemented smoothly and that there is no resistance to them.”

The announcement, now brought forward, about the reallocation of plants with the much-vaunted new “competitive” electric models is supposedly to reassure VW workers and stall them as long as possible.

Meanwhile, the IG Metall representatives at the plant will ensure implementation of the downsizing programme.

This is because the major shareholders and investors are pushing for it. They are dissatisfied with VW’s falling share price, while Tesla’s is rising steeply. The brutal methods of exploitation in Elon Musk’s Gigafactories are the benchmark for them.

In order to successfully oppose the job cuts, rank-and-file action committees independent of IG Metall and its works council must be set up. All VW workers who seriously want to fight must unite in these committees.

They will immediately get in touch with their international allies, the workers who are fighting against similar attacks on jobs and wages in almost every country in the world. For example, 150,000 auto workers in the US are currently in wage disputes with Ford, GM and Stellantis, but are also being held back from striking, for which 97 percent of the workforce voted, by their union, the UAW (United Auto Workers).

The formation of a rank-and-file action committee at VW will contribute decisively to building an axis of resistance between Wolfsburg, Detroit and other car-making centers and to making the struggle against the cutbacks at VW part of a systematic, international offensive in the car and car parts industry.

We call on all VW workers: Get in touch via Whatsapp message at +491633378340 or fill out the following form.



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