

“One alone is not enough. Strikes must happen in several plants.”

VW workers in Wolfsburg, Germany fear for their jobs

Our reporters
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On Monday, a team from the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) spoke to auto workers at Volkswagen’s largest German plant, in Wolfsburg. They distributed the flyer “Defend all jobs at VW! Build action committees!” calling for auto workers to participate in an online meeting on Wednesday. Around 1,400 workers who were leaving the plant or arriving for work during the shift change took the flyer, some of them also took several more for their colleagues.

VW workers are threatened with severe wage cuts, mass layoffs and plant closures, posing far-reaching consequences for the entire working class in Germany. As one VW worker put it: “If the auto industry goes down the drain, everything in Germany will go down the drain.”

Thorsten, a 55-year-old production worker, described the mood at the plant:

There is a great deal of uncertainty. VW also wants us to do more work for less money. They want to cut our bonus, then they want to cut 10 percent of our pay, leaving only Christmas and vacation payments. But in June, they paid shareholders another 4.5 billion euros. Then, at the beginning of September, they threw a luxury party for the board members in Sweden. No wonder that anger is growing here in the plant.

The announcement by VW management that it would terminate the existing contract came as a surprise: “No one expected VW to go the whole hog within a few days. It was a shock.”

Thorsten described how the attacks have already begun:

The first contract workers were already affected last week—they received their notice from one day to the next, four men in my department. They were still on the night shift on Thursday, went home to sleep afterwards, and on Friday at 3 p.m. they received an email from [personnel service provider] Autovision saying “Volkswagen has ended your assignment.” They were no longer allowed to enter the plant premises on Friday and could no longer take up work. Temporary workers are always the first to be let go.

If the plant were to close, Thorsten, who is in his mid-50s, said he would have a hard time finding a new job. He still has some hope that the IG Metall union will negotiate something “reasonable,” but trust is waning at the plant: “Discontent is—even with the union. One colleague has already talked about resigning.”

IG Metall has called on workers to travel to the site of the negotiations in Hanover on September 25, Thorsten explained, “But we have to take leave for it, the union won’t pay for it.” Nevertheless, many colleagues wanted to go there and go on strike, he said.

Almost all of the workers at the north gate of the plant criticised the role of the union and the works council. A 61-year-old worker complained that conditions at the plant had steadily worsened in recent years: “And the union shares the blame. Everyone knows that. It is the snake in the basket. It started with [works council leaders] Volkert, then Osterloh...”

Klaus Volkert, chairman of the VW general works council and a member of the supervisory board from 1990 to 2005, was convicted and imprisoned for his criminal activities and involvement in the VW corruption scandal. His successor, Bernd Osterloh (predecessor of the current works council leader Daniela Cavallo), received such high salaries that even the judiciary opened an investigation against him.

From the start, the union has collaborated closely with the company management to increase the exploitation of contract and temporary workers at VW. A female employee in the catering business at Volkswagen Group Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of VW, told the WSWS: “For us, everything is much worse. Do you know how long I could talk about this? It effects all the working conditions...”

She was disgusted by the blatant social contradictions in the company: “Look at what [CEO Oliver] Blume earns in a day! We don’t even need to discuss that. But people are being laid off! We’ll have to work even harder for that.”

VW is the frontrunner when it comes to enriching corporate bosses at the expense of the workers. As the *Wolfsburg Allgemeine Zeitung* reported, in 2023 a member of the VW board of management earned on average 85 times as much as a VW worker. This means that the inequality between management and employees at Volkswagen is the highest of the 30 companies listed on Germany’s Dax index.

Last year, Oliver Blume was the first boss of a Dax company to earn over €10 million. According to a study published by the German private investors’ association DSW in July, he is followed by the managers of Adidas, Deutsche Bank, SAP, Siemens and competitors Mercedes and BMW.

According to the company's 2023 annual report, the other nine members of the VW board of management also received lavish salaries, mostly in excess of €4 million, including HR boss Gunnar Kilian (€6.2 million), who used to head the works council and was paid handsomely for it, and Ralf Brandstätter, CEO of Volkswagen (China) Investment Company (€4.8 million). In total, more than €40 million was paid into the accounts of the management board in 2023.

In an interview with the WSWS, a 58-year-old assembly line worker expressed her disgust at how the bosses revel in their wealth:

The management has no idea what they are doing here. First, they announce that they want to demolish everything here, then they go to Sweden and party in a luxury hotel and tell everyone about it... They don't notice anything anymore, they have no limits, no morals, no decency, nothing!

Many young people worked in her department and were now fearing for their future, she said, "Almost all of us started out as temporary workers and we were temporary workers for three years. They were always afraid of losing their jobs if they were sick for too long or opened their mouths. I am from a different generation, I come from Dresden, and I always opened my mouth... And that's what got me new jobs from time to time." Her younger colleagues often have to pay off very high loans for their apartments or cars—"Hard times are coming for young people. That's capitalism."

Workers also expressed their opposition to the warmongering policy against Russia and China, which is being pushed by coalition government of the Social Democrats (SPD), Liberal Democrats (FDP) and Greens.

In response to the question of whether he feared the danger of a nuclear escalation of the proxy war in Ukraine, one worker who had been at VW since 2009 replied, "Yes, definitely. Putin is powerful, after all. For decades, Germany and Russia worked together, and now? The gas comes to us through several channels and is much more expensive."

Asked about the role of the SPD, which is part of the state government in Lower Saxony where the Wolfsburg plant is located and is represented on the VW supervisory board and is well aware of the cutback plans, he said, "The SPD and [Chancellor Olaf] Scholz are not supporting us. He supports the war in Ukraine, but not us."

He said he was feeling the economic consequences of the war himself, "Everything has become more expensive. You go to work, pay for your car, your apartment, and then you are supposed to live somehow. It's not possible. Now prices have gone up again—allegedly because of Putin, but that doesn't make sense." When WSWS reporters explained that the government was passing on the costs of rearmament and war directly to working people and cutting social spending, he replied, "Yes, we should have supported the schools and kindergartens instead, but they're not doing that."

Among the workers at the factory gate, who themselves come from many different countries, there was a particularly positive response to the international orientation of the action committees advocated by the SGP and WSWS, which are fighting for the unification of workers worldwide in the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC).

Some workers who took the leaflet responded by shouting out, "Strike!" or "These [cutbacks] are politically motivated." One

commented on the enormous consequences for the entire region: "When the plant here is no more, they can plow up Lower Saxony."

And indeed, not only Lower Saxony, but also the neighbouring state of Saxony-Anhalt would be severely affected. According to the *Mitteldeutsche Zeitung*, 4,900 auto workers commute from Saxony-Anhalt to Lower Saxony, thousands of them to VW's main plant. After the collapse of the former East Germany, VW recruited many workers from there.

Many workers told the WSWS that they did not see the situation at VW in isolation from the global economic crisis. That is why they agreed with uniting across locations and companies. "One person alone is not enough. Strikes must happen in several plants. Management is getting richer and richer. But the money can't be made without the workers," one worker commented.

At the same time, some of the workers interviewed by the WSWS expressed a wait-and-see attitude. They said they had to see what happened first. But it is precisely this hesitation that is dangerous. The united front of corporate management, the trade union, works council and SPD want one thing above all: to keep the workers quiet in order to push through the cutback plans and layoffs that have long been in the pipeline behind their backs.

The WSWS appeal distributed at the plant states:

All jobs at all locations must be defended in principle. No concessions must be made on wages, social benefits or other workers' rights. The socialist principle, according to which the rights of workers take precedence over the profit drive of the oligarchs and billionaires, must be the starting point of the resistance.

The announced cutbacks at VW are "a declaration of war on all workers and marks the beginning of a new stage of the class struggle." VW workers can only defend themselves against this if they take up the struggle themselves. But for this counteroffensive they need new fighting organisations that they themselves control and which are internationally networked and independent of the trade unions. That is why we call on all workers at VW and in other car plants and supplier factories—help build an action committee at VW!



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