

Over 8,000 VW autoworkers launch unlimited strike in Slovakia

By Dietmar Henning
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Autoworkers at Volkswagen (VW) began an unlimited strike Tuesday in Slovakia. Approximately 8,600 of the 12,300 workers gathered at the beginning of the strike in front of the plant in the capital city of Bratislava and shut it down. It is the first strike at Volkswagen since the company opened operations in Slovakia in 1991, and the first strike at a major auto plant in an Eastern European country since the reintroduction of capitalism.

In the VW plant, where the SUV VW Touareg and Audi Q7 are built, as well as the small vehicles VW Ap, Seat Mii and Skoda Citigo, the strike halted assembly lines. Production of bodies for the Porsche Cayenne, mid-sized luxury crossover vehicle, was also stopped.

The workers are demanding a wage increase of 16 percent. VW rejected this and in its last offer presented a 4.5 percent increase for this year, 4.2 percent for next year and a one-off payment of €350 (US \$391).

The trade union at VW, “Moderné odbory Volkswagen” (Modern Union Volkswagen), was compelled to reject the eleventh round of talks last Friday and call a strike. “We deserve at least a double-digit increase,” said trade union chairman Zoroslav Smolinsky. VW workers in Slovakia earn roughly €1,800 (US \$2,010) per month. Although this is more than the national average wage, which stands at €970 (US \$1,083), it remains significantly less than in Germany.

Stanislav Galva, a worker, told AFP, “Money is not the issue. The issue is the decency of the company.” VW had “such large profits” and should share them with the workers, he added.

The mounting anger among autoworkers over growing social inequality—the minimum wage in Slovakia is around €400 per month—compelled Prime

Minister Robert Fico from the social democratic Smer-SD to feign support for the strike.

“Why should a company that builds the most expensive and luxurious cars with a high level of labour productivity pay its Slovakian workers half or a third of what they pay the same workers in Western Europe?” he said.

Far from supporting the workers, Fico, who leads a coalition government with far-right nationalist parties, has sought to divert the social anger of the working class along anti-German and nationalist lines. This would not be the first time. Fico’s election campaign last year was directed entirely against refugees, even though only 330 asylum applications were made in Slovakia in 2015 and just eight accepted.

The workers who build the vehicles at VW have no hope of affording them. The Bratislava plant produced almost 390,000 vehicles last year, more than 1,000 per day. But almost all production is for export. Around 99 percent of the production is exported to 148 countries, above all Germany, the US and China.

The bodywork produced at the Slovakian plant for the Porsche Cayenne—which starts at €53,000 (US \$59,000)—is sent to the VW plant in Leipzig, Germany, where final manufacturing is carried out. VW also produces engines in Bratislava and has three further production facilities, in Martin, Stupava and Kosice. Production was reportedly “normal” at these plants.

VW is by far the largest private sector employer in the country, which has a population of 5.4 million. Calculated according to its population size, Slovakia is the largest auto manufacturer in the world. More than a million vehicles are produced each year. For almost three decades, the major producers have exploited the low wages in the former Stalinist-run countries by outsourcing parts of the production process to Eastern

Europe. Jaguar Land Rover will open a new plant in Slovakia next year.

But the self-confidence of the autoworkers, and their wages, have been rising. The French PSA-Group (Peugeot-Citroën) and South Korea's Kia recently increased wages at their Slovakian plants by 6.3 and 7.5 percent respectively.

It is widely anticipated in industry circles that workers in other Eastern European countries will follow the example of the Slovakian VW workers, since they often earn even less than their colleagues in Bratislava. In the neighbouring Czech Republic, workers at the VW subsidiary Skoda earn €1,400 (US \$1,564) per month.

On Tuesday afternoon, chief executive of Volkswagen Slovakia Ralf Sacht told a press conference, "We are at the top of the remuneration scale within the V4," i.e., the Vysegrad states of Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary. Wages in Slovakia were the same level as in Portugal and Spain, he complained.

The plant management described the strike as reflecting a "lack of willingness to constructively negotiate". The demands of the trade union were unacceptable and would damage the plant's competitiveness, the interests of the company and also the workers, the statement claimed.

On Monday, a VW spokesperson maintained this position. The union's demands were "unacceptable," he said, adding that a wage increase of 16 percent would endanger the competitiveness of the company and its future.

Sacht, a German executive, took over the leadership of VW Slovakia last year. Accustomed to the IG Metall union in Germany collaborating with management to suppress strikes, he expressed surprise at the resistance of workers, saying he expected the Slovakian union to start negotiations by offering concessions to VW. He did comment on the strike, only saying, "We are prepared."

VW workers in Slovakia are digging in for a long battle. To advance this fight, however, however, they should strive to unite with the 600,000 VW workers in Germany and throughout the world in common fight against the global auto giant.

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