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Worker participation in workplace restructuring in the automotive industry : a comparative study of German and South African Volkswagen plants, 1970-2009.

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2010-08-11
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/8390

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ABSTRACT

This research report comparatively investigates labour's responses to work restructuring at the Volkswagen (VW) plants in Germany (Kassel) and South Africa (Uitenhage). Since the advent of industrial revolution, the automotive industry has experienced rapid changes in work organisation and production systems. This report discusses work restructuring in the industry from the 1970s to 2009, and examines labour's engagement with it at the two Volkswagen plants. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups were conducted with Works Council members at the Kassel plant and shop stewards at the Uitenhage plant. The report concludes that VW workers at the Kassel plant are more proactive and effective in their engagement with workplace restructuring than their counterparts at the Uitenhage plant. The report proposes two factors to explain this variation.

Firstly, the report argues that the German industrial relations system enables workers at the Kassel plant to influence and shape work restructuring through institutionalised participation. Secondly, the inability of workers at the Uitenhage plant to influence restructuring of work is worsened by the fact that their plant is controlled by VW headquarters in Germany. The concept of *imperial restructuring* is developed to highlight difficulties faced by labour at the Uitenhage plant to influence work restructuring processes. It is further argued that Marxist literature on worker participation ignores that workers are sometimes interested in participating in decision making when confronted by uncertainty about their jobs, just as employers are interested in worker participation when their authority and legitimacy is threatened.