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Social calm restored in Belgian automobile sector at last?

June 1998 saw a spontaneous strike at Volkswagen's Brussels plant, the latest in a series of disputes in the Belgian automobile sector. However, with an agreement ratified by VW workers at the end of July, a truce seems to have been reached.

In June 1998, there was a wildcat strike at Volkswagen's plant in Vorst/Forest (Brussels) ([BE9806239N](#)), confirming the poor industrial relations climate at the site, and restoring social peace was not easy. With a current annual production of 190,000 vehicles (about 70% of the maximum capacity) and expected losses of about BEF 3.5 billion in 1998, chief executive officer Jules Ackermans has blamed the employees for their unwillingness to meet the rising demand for the new *Golf* model. Union representatives, however, have stated that there are technical and organisational problems at the factory.

To meet production requirements, an agreement was reached on 15 June 1998 between representatives of employees and management at Vorst/Forest. On 30 July 1998, employees voted 87% in favour of the agreement (on a turn-out of 47%), which introduces shiftwork over weekends in return for a fixed contract for 1,300 temporary employees ([BE9808152F](#)). The goal is to meet the production quota set by central management in Wolfsburg, which means an increase of 240,000 cars per year.

Alternatives to the agreement were:

- keeping the current production level but dismissing all temporary employees and introducing Saturday working at least 30 times per year; or
- even more drastic measures to reduce production and employment.

The weekend shift will work an average of 30 hours over the weekend for a 40-hour wage and four days off in lieu. The new working pattern will be introduced on a voluntary basis unless volunteers are lacking in numbers, which will require forced weekend shifts for some workers. The question remains, however, whether the new working pattern will stabilise industrial relations at Vorst/Forest whilst at the same time reaching the higher production standards.

The VW dispute was the latest in a series of disputes in the Belgian automobile sector. Elsewhere, at the Opel Belgium plant in Antwerp there is also positive news following the drastic restructuring at the beginning of 1998 ([BE9803229F](#)). Due to the success of the new *Astra* model, a number of measures will now be adopted: "only" 800 instead of 1,000 jobs will be cut; 140 temporary workers will receive fixed-term contracts; 1,000 temporary workers will receive a contract extension; and about 200 additional temporary workers will be hired.

Events at Volkswagen and Opel may not herald an era of social peace in the Belgian automobile sector. However, after the turbulence of the past 18 months, a ceasefire seems to have been reached.

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- [Greater working time flexibility at Volkswagen plant in Brussels](#)
- [Opel Belgium: more flexible work organisation reduces redundancies](#)