

Germany: Workers strike at AEG's Nuremberg plant

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About 1,700 workers at the AEG plant in Nuremberg have begun strike action to defend their jobs. More than 96 percent of union members voted for industrial action in the middle of January after two rounds of wage negotiations between the IG Metall union and AEG management had broken down some days before.

Although staff want to continue the fight to keep their jobs, their trade union, IG Metall, has already accepted the plant's closure by the end of 2007. The union's aim in participating in the wage negotiations was only to make the closure "as costly as possible" for AEG.

On January 13, a motion to regard negotiations as having failed was accepted by the joint wage committee, thereby clearing the way for a strike ballot.

After extensive protests by AEG workers in December of last year following the announcement of plans to close the factory by the Electrolux concern—to which AEG now belongs—both management and the works council decided to place employees on holiday until January 4 in order to stifle further unrest. After the break, however, workers were determined to take further action.

Consequently, the wage negotiations were accompanied by further protests from the workforce. Directly after the collapse of negotiations on Monday, January 9, several hundred workers stopped work to assemble at the gates of the plant. The protest continued into the following day. Spontaneous meetings were held, and a great part of the workforce deliberately worked to rule.

When it became known that the negotiations had finally broken down, 500 to 600 workers took part in a token strike on the following Friday morning in defence of their jobs.

Brief talks held the day before in Ingolstadt made clear that AEG's management team was adamantly opposed to any concessions to the workers. Contrary to intentions announced during the initial negotiations in Munich, representatives of the firm failed to make a single offer. Instead, they accused union representatives of not being seriously interested in resolving the conflict and of wanting to provoke industrial action. A company representative declared that the union had been planning "wide-scale strikes and other measures for days."

In the event of an agreement being reached, AEG management had demanded assurances from the works council and union to refrain from any form of protest action until the end of January. Owing to the volatile mood of the workers, however, union representatives considered such a promise too risky. A union spokesman explained that the union could not comply with this request because "the workers were fed up."

Meanwhile, the Electrolux and AEG management were hardening their stance. Central management again declared that the plant's closure had been irrevocably determined, and the staff were to be treated as was customary in the shutdown of any other site.

Nuremberg is one of 14 "high-wage" sites that are to be closed down in the coming year. The plants are to be relocated to eastern Europe, Asia and South America. Hans Straberg, the Swedish director, intends to combine the most lucrative sectors of these businesses and float the resulting concern on the stock exchange under the name of Husqvarna. This will obviously entail further sackings and a reduction of full-time jobs.

The AEG and Electrolux management were not only intransigent on the issue of wage negotiations. The directors went on to unleash further provocations. About 100 members of staff at AEG Logistik Ltd. are

currently being pressured to agree to a revised wage scale by February 1. The firm's department of logistics was converted into an independent company so that it could be excluded from the IG Metall trade union. Now, the lowest wage rates in the wholesale and retail industries can be imposed.

Workers are thus threatened with a considerable loss in wages. According to figures from the works council, a skilled storage worker on a gross income of €2,300 a month will earn €400. In the case of highly qualified employees on a monthly wage of €4,500, earnings will decrease by the huge amount of €2,000.

Furthermore, management is threatening to include the AEG factory in nearby Rothenburg ob der Tauber—where 1,300 workers produce electric stoves—in its plans for closure. The AEG executive board has warned that continual negative headlines about AEG could damage the reputation of the brand name in general, thus endangering jobs at Rothenburg.

That the central management of a group such as Electrolux can act so audaciously and intransigently is attributable to a great extent to the cowardly attitude of the trade unions and works council whose policies are directed towards making compromises with the company and shedding workers as efficiently as possible.

Directly after Electrolux announced the closure of its Nuremberg plant, high-profile trade unionists declared that nothing could be done about the destruction of more than 1,700 jobs. The only thing to do was try to secure as much as possible for those soon to be made redundant.

This was also the line followed by the union representatives in their negotiations with the central management of the company. High compensation, the establishment of an ancillary firm and generous early-retirement schemes for older employees were the main features of the package of demands they took into the negotiations.

The chief negotiators of the union were even prepared to make concessions regarding these timid demands. Werner Neugebauer, IG Metall's regional head, declared: "Negotiations could have been successfully concluded within three hours if the top management had been willing to recommend two months' severance pay for each year of employment and a two-year work placement program for each employee."

Demands up to that point had been for a compensation of three months' wages for each year of employment and temporary work placement until 2010.

Since the start of the protests, the trade union and the works council have systematically tried to either water down or scrap these demands. The agreement reached before Christmas—to enforce a cooling-off holiday period—was designed to serve this aim. Also, when hundreds of workers assembled on Friday, January 13, works council chairman Harald Dix made a short declaration, calling upon workers to go home and not hang about on the factory premises any longer. In this way, any spontaneous industrial action on the part of the workers was to be headed off.

While union representatives were feigning an aggressive mood and calling for strike action in front of the assembled workers, they were trying to reach an agreement with management as soon as possible. They demanded that company representatives dispense with their "blockade mentality" and return to the negotiation table.

See Also:

Germany: the closure of Nuremberg's AEG works and the role of the unions
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