

German engineering workers stage warning strikes

Ulrich Rippert
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Last week, more than 80,000 German engineering workers in over 300 enterprises held work stoppages, or “warning strikes.”

The centre of the first strike wave was in Germany’s most populous state, North Rhine Westphalia, where more than 33,000 workers at 181 enterprises joined in the actions. The largest demonstration took place at the Ford works in Cologne, with some 10,000 participants. Some 22,000 workers in Hesse, Rhineland Palatinate, the Saarland and Thuringia also took part in the strike action, according to the IG Metall union.

In Bavaria, approximately 10,000 participated, including the night shifts at Osram, Man Roland and EADS in Augsburg, and Epcos, Infineon and Bosch in Munich. Some 8,400 demonstrated in Baden Württemberg, 6,200 in Lower Saxony, and 3,500 in Berlin.

On the second day, the union expanded the strike. Almost 70,000 engineering workers at 199 enterprises stopped work on Thursday. The action was centred at auto manufacturers DaimlerChrysler and BMW.

Some 12,000 workers downed tools at the Sindelfingen DaimlerChrysler plant. At BMW’s Bavarian factory in Dingolfing, 11,000 were involved in strike action at one time or another.

The IG Metall union is demanding a 5 percent wage rise for 3.4 million workers employed in the engineering and electrical industries. The union has criticised the employers for not yet making a serious offer despite high rates of profit and full order books. Instead, the employers’ association has said an increase of only 1.4 percent is acceptable.

Speaking before 3,000 Ford strikers in Saarlouis, IG Metall head Jürgen Peters called on the employers to stop the “Punch and Judy Show” and make a “negotiable offer.” Peters said the union was interested

in solutions, not a conflict, but that it would not shy away from a conflict if necessary.

In a press interview, the IG Metall district secretary in North Rhine Westphalia, Detlef Wetzel, announced the union’s readiness to hold a ballot for indefinite strike action after Easter. The employers should not get the wrong idea, declared Wetzel. He said there was a high level of readiness to strike at engineering and electrical factories.

The employers were unimpressed and sharply criticised the strikes. Such actions were outmoded and did not “advance the collective bargaining process,” declared the president of the employers’ association, Martin Kannegiesser. “Regardless of what we propose, the IG Metall remains tied to its old rituals,” he added, accusing the union of displaying a “negative attitude.” The employers had promised a “clear structure for a possible wage increase,” he said.

The employers say they are not prepared to accept the IG Metall’s demand for a 5 percent wage rise because it poses a danger to smaller enterprises, which are trapped “between rising raw materials costs and their customers’ demand for savings.” Kannegiesser called for sharper wages differentials. Alongside a basic salary, those in different occupational groups should receive performance payments and a share in the success of the business, he said.

In fact, real wages have been falling for years. Taking prices into account, wages have fallen in Germany since 2003, according to a report by Claudia Witte for *tagesschau.de*. The Federal Statistics Office reports that the average employee has lost 2.7 percent in purchasing power.

A survey of the change in real wage levels throughout the European Union over the past 10 years (1995-2004) shows Germany ranked at the bottom. While real wages

in the EU as a whole rose by 9.9 percent, they sank in Germany by 0.9 percent.

“There has been a redistribution [of incomes] towards profits,” said Reinhard Bispinck, an expert with the Economics and Sociological Institute of the Hans Boeckler Foundation. “While business profits have been rising strongly, German workers, for the first time since reunification, now earn less on paper than they earned the previous year. The total of gross wages, including employers’ social insurance contributions, fell by 0.5 percent from 2004. On the other hand, income from business and property increased in the last year by 6.1 percent, and by 11.7 percent in 2004.”

One of the reasons for the dramatic tumble in wages is the fact the jobs market has changed considerably. So-called “precarious” working conditions, mini-jobs, part-time working and one-euro jobs have increased. The low-wage sector is growing and exerts a strong pressure on the overall wages structure, Bispinck stressed. Between 2000 and 2004, the number of full-time employees sank by more than 7 percent; those receiving low wages rose by 18 percent; those in part-time employment increased by 10 percent.

Although the demand for a 5 percent wage increase is fully justified, IG Metall has signalled its readiness to compromise and accept a lower figure. In a discussion with the *Passauer Neue Presse*, the IG Metall deputy chairman, Berthold Huber, said that the union had always shown a high degree of “social responsibility.” The warning strikes were meant, above all, to impress on the employers that they should make a serious offer.

Referring to the continuing seven-week strike in the public services, Huber said, “The engineering and electrical industries are not the public services. We want a solution, if possible before the industrial dispute starts.”

Both IG Metall Chairman Peters and his deputy, Huber, are long-standing members of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). They know only too well that Franz Müntefering, a former SPD chairman and now employment minister in the Grand Coalition government with the Christian Democratic Union, is planning drastic attacks on job security regulations.

The coalition government in Berlin wants to implement similar measures to those that have met with massive resistance in France from students, workers and other sections of the population. In contrast to

France, however, in Germany it would not only be young people under 26 who could be fired without cause during their first two years of employment, but all workers.

Instead of seeing the readiness to strike in the electrical and engineering industries in Germany as the prelude to a broad political mobilisation against the anti-social attacks of the Grand Coalition government, and the development of a European-wide resistance to such policies, IG Metall proceeds in precisely the opposite direction. It seeks to limit the mobilisation in the factories to isolated protest actions, while it supports the government and collaborates with it.



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