

German: IG Metall employs splitting tactics at Siemens

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31 July 2008

The trade union IG Metall has adopted the basic principle of “divide and rule” in its current negotiations with the management of Siemens, the German-based multinational company.

In order to save German facilities and avoid a confrontation with the company’s German workforce, IG Metall and its works council representatives have proposed that the company close its vehicle-manufacturing plant in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic. The Siemens Zlicin factory in Prague is to be sold off and—if no buyer is found—closed down by this autumn. The company currently employs 1,100 workers.

Siemens Chairman Peter Löscher had called upon shop stewards to make “alternative proposals” to temporarily prevent the closure of Siemens factories in Germany. The trade union then subsequently touted as a great success the fact that Löscher had accepted its proposal for Siemens to rid itself of the Czech factory and guarantee that no German plants would be closed before September 2010.

The union went on to praise “the cooperation between management and unions” and is taking over responsibility for organising the details for the shedding of jobs. At the same time, it called off at short notice protest actions initiated by workers at several Siemens plants.

Writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Dirk Graalmann, who has closely followed the negotiations at the Krefelder Hotel, wrote of the “trustful harmony” that existed between management and workers’ delegates and continued: “A few kilometres further east the affected Siemens workers trotted home after finishing their shift, while in the salon Krefeld, the personnel executive committee chairman, Siegfried Russwurm, stood harmoniously alongside works council boss Ralf

Heckmann and contently concluded: ‘We are united in principle with the employees’ side on the issue of guaranteeing Siemens’ future.’”

By signing a “basic plan paper,” which had been previously negotiated between Siemens boss Löscher and the leader of IG Metall, Berthold Huber, the trade union and works councils are assuming a key role in destroying jobs and enforcing deteriorations in working conditions under the pretext of organising “socially compatible” job losses.

Siemens head of personnel Siegfried Russwurm stressed that following negotiations with the works council and trade union, the company was determined to press ahead with its original plan of implementing savings of €1.2 billion in administration costs and shedding 17,000 jobs worldwide.

The 6,000 jobs to be cut in Germany are mainly planned in the company’s administration. But jobs will also go in the transport and engineering division “Mobility,” which has failed to meet profit targets set by the executive committee. An estimated 560 jobs are to be cut in Germany and another 2,500 at various Siemens plants worldwide. This represents one tenth of the workforce of the “Mobility” division.

Instead of organising the joint resistance of workers at all locations in Germany and throughout the world against management’s proposals, the union and works councils are doing precisely the opposite. They are playing off workers in different countries against one another as part of a policy aimed at implementing the company line and guaranteeing dividends for Siemens shareholders.

The news that the company’s factory in the Czech capital was to be sold off or closed hit the workers in Prague like a bombshell. Siemens is one of the biggest employers in the Czech Republic, with a total

workforce of 18,000. As soon as the news was announced, the workers in Prague began a spontaneous protest strike and stopped work for one and a half hours. According to representatives of the Czech industrial workers' union Kovo, workers in the factory are shocked and angered by the plans to hive off the plant and are clearly prepared to take strike action.

However, the reaction of union officials in Prague has been no better than that of their colleagues in Germany. While occasionally adopting a radical tone to appeal to the local workforce, they too are cooperating closely with their respective management. Last Thursday, representatives of Kovo and Siemens management met to discuss the future of car production in Zlicin.

The talks proceeded on the assumption that nothing could be done to oppose the plans of Siemens management and mainly dealt with such issues as redundancy payments for workers who would lose their jobs.

The union officials in Prague are also attempting to come up with a deal as quickly as possible in order to avoid any drawn-out conflict: They are very well aware that any prolonged strike by the Siemens workers in Prague could rapidly spread to other sections of the working class.

At the end of June, 800,000 demonstrators took to the streets of Prague to protest against the "reform politics" of the Czech government, which plans huge cuts to the country's health and pensions system.

In line with IG Metall in Germany, Kovo in the Czech Republic has a long tradition of operating as a company co-manager and pursues a similar national policy to its German cousin. Kovo boss Josef Stredula explained that the closure of the Czech plant was "a political decision" directed against the Czech people, and complained that the Czechs were being treated as "second class European Union citizens."

Neither the German IG Metall nor the Czech Kovo has any principled opposition to Siemens's plans to restructure under conditions where the company's profits are soaring. Both unions have a long history of collaborating with such plans, or even assisting in drawing up plans for job losses, in their capacity as members of the company's supervisory board and in the works councils.

This is by no means the first time that the trade unions have sought to employ a "divide and rule" tactic

to split the workforces of the same firm operating in different countries. Only recently, both the German and French trade unions refused to take up a joint struggle for the unconditional defence of all jobs at the French-German aviation company Airbus, which had announced major job cuts. Instead, the unions on both sides of the border carefully organised separate strikes and demonstrations at different locations in order to prevent French and German workers coming together.

IG Metall also conducted a similar campaign last year in connection with redundancies announced by the German automaker Volkswagen. The main VW works council in Germany agreed to increased working times without pay in order to ensure that the company shifted production from its Brussels plant to Wolfsburg in Germany. The move then resulted in the closure of the factory in Brussels.

A break with the corporatist politics of the trade unions and work councils is a basic condition for the effective defence of the jobs at Siemens and all other companies. Workers must establish their own defence committees independently of the trade unions and establish contact with workforces in other locations and countries.

The building of such defence committees against mass redundancies and welfare cuts must be bound up with discussions on a new political perspective.

Such a perspective must be based on the international character of modern production and the common interests of all workers worldwide. At the heart of such a programme is the socialist transformation of society in order to establish the priority of social interests over profits. In order to facilitate discussions on this perspective and assist in developing a joint struggle by all, we call upon Siemens employees to contact the Editorial Board of the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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