

BMW plans early halt in production at German plants

WSWS reporters speak to BMW workers

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The management of the auto manufacturer BMW has introduced measures that shift the burden of the recession and the crisis in the automobile industry entirely onto the workforce. In this, the management is working hand in hand with the BMW Works Council and IG Metall union bureaucrats in Bavaria and Saxony.

Production at the company's main plant in Munich will be stopped in mid-December until January 9 next year. The rapid decrease in sales—in October alone, sales figures sank by 8.3 percent—is cited by management as grounds for halting production early on December 8. Negotiations with the Works Council to this end are presently taking place.

The break in production is also being extended to four weeks at the firm's Regensburg plant, from the second week in December until the second week in January. The Regensburg Works Council agreed to the extended closure on Monday last week, according to Works Council chair Werner Zierer. With a workforce of approximately 10,000 and a daily output of around 1,000 cars, the factory in Regensburg is the second largest BMW plant worldwide after its Dingolfing works in Lower Bavaria.

The production line was also closed down for four days last week at BMW's Leipzig plant, in Saxony. At the same time, plans for future production have been drastically reduced. According to the company, the Leipzig factory will now only manufacture 400 cars per day instead of the 700 previously built. As a result, BMW has told nearly half the 700 contract workers in Leipzig they will not be needed from next month.

BMW employs nearly 108,000 worldwide, with about 80,000 jobs in Germany. At the beginning of this year the company had already announced that more than 8,000

jobs would go, including some 5,000 part-time posts. In view of the crisis in the automobile industry, up to 2,500 jobs in Germany are now at risk, according to company executives.

This slashing of jobs is not only a reaction to sinking sales figures. BMW is using the crisis to implement an extensive cuts programme, in order to increase shareholder profits.

"The BMW Group is consistently aligned towards profitability," board chairman Norbert Reithofer said when he submitted a "strategy paper" last year that included the elimination of 8,000 jobs.

At that point, the company could look to a full order book. In 2006, turnover had risen over 8 percent compared with the previous year. In the US, BMW returned the strongest sales of any German manufacturer, and turnover has also risen continuously in China.

While company and Works Council representatives never tire of saying that the short-time working and austerity measures are necessary and cannot be avoided, the workforce is reacting with increasing anger.

The Works Council and management are "all in cahoots"

The vast majority of those who spoke to reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* outside the factory gates in Munich told of the concerns shared by many BMW workers. Fear and uncertainty are widespread in the factory. Nobody is sure how things are going to develop, and the workforce is faced with bad news almost every day. They related that the Works Council does not

provide any clear information, only saying workers should wait and stay calm.

Many workers were reluctant to talk for fear of reprisals, or preferred to remain anonymous.

Erwin P. has worked at BMW for 34 years. He said, "The mood here is bad." While workers with more seniority were still relatively safe, many younger ones were fearful of losing their jobs, he said.

"Many fear they could lose their job," confirmed a Turkish member of the Works Council, who has worked for BMW for 35 years and preferred not to give his name. He said many of his colleagues favoured taking a redundancy settlement because they saw no future for themselves in the factory.

He explained how the situation had fundamentally changed at BMW over the last few years. Compared with those in other companies, BMW workers were relatively better off. Pay used to be clearly above the usual level for the industry, and there were other generous benefits. Today, workloads have increased and there are constant attacks on wages.

Franc B., who also has 35 years' employment at BMW, reported on the harsher conditions with "ever fewer people on the production line having to complete more work."

Hassan K., employed in the body shell department, also confirmed the cuts in personnel. "They have sacked many people. One company that supplied contract workers has been completely wound up. Some 50 percent of the contract workers have already been fired."

Contradicting the claims of the management, workers explained that production cutback was taking place at the expense of the workforce. "We are being told to use the surplus hours we have built up. Anyone who hasn't accumulated any will have to use their holidays. The stress is making some people quite ill," explained the Turkish Works Council member.

Asked about the role of the Works Council leadership and the IG Metall trade union, he stated clearly, "They're all in cahoots. If a new shop steward is elected, the first thing he does is speak with the boss."

There is hardly another company where the union acts so clearly as co-managers as at BMW. Austerity measures are not only nodded through by the supposed "employee representatives" but are even proposed by them. Completely flexible working, which makes everyday life nearly impossible for most workers, was introduced in the 1990s with the support of the Works Council.

As well as working Saturdays, an annualised hours'

contract was introduced, meaning workers can build up to 200 hours of "overtime" a year without receiving any bonus payment, and which they are now being told they must take as enforced time off. These flexible working arrangements make it possible for management to send workers home whenever they want.

The statements of IG Metall were particularly brazen at the beginning of the year regarding the announced job cuts at the companies supplying the contract workers. The union openly sided with Norbert Reithofer, the director in charge of production, and management. "We are not at all upset," said Matthias Jena, IG Metall spokesman in Bavaria at that time. "If production is cut back, fewer people are needed." This was completely normal, he said.

For a long time, IG Metall and the Works Council have been complicit in BMW's plans. For months, behind the scenes, management, union and the Works Council have been negotiating and agreeing to the job cuts.

This collusion by the union and management could also be seen in the recent contract that also covers BMW, and which most workers found completely dissatisfying.

In total, some 550,000 participated in protest actions and warning strikes organised by IG Metall over the previous weeks, clearly showing that many workers are no longer prepared to accept further cuts in their income. The fact that IG Metall abandoned its original demand for an 8 percent increase and signed a contract that will entail cuts in real wages was sharply criticised by many BMW workers.

"It was much too little after we had gone for so long with no increase," a long-serving employee complained. As at numerous other companies, several thousand BMW workers had also taken part in the warning strikes.



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