

Germany: ThyssenKrupp workers demonstrate against job losses and wage cuts

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More than 10,000 ThyssenKrupp workers from throughout Germany demonstrated April 6 in Duisburg, to protest against job losses and wage cuts. Delegations travelled from approximately 200 ThyssenKrupp plants in Germany, which employ 85,000 workers.

Some 30 busloads of steelworkers came from neighbouring Bochum, with shipyard workers coming from Kiel, Hamburg and Emden, while others travelled from Neuhausen in Baden-Württemberg, from Gerlach, Sauerland and Schwelgern to the north of Duisburg and Hüttenheim to the south. Solidarity greetings were sent from fellow workers in Brazil, and from steelworkers in Salzgitter. A CGT delegation also came from ArcelorMittal in France.

The concerns of many of those attending about the future were written in their faces. They know that the planned restructuring of the ThyssenKrupp group, which is set to save €500 million annually, will be entirely at their expense. These changes will reduce the company's five divisions to two, and are linked with job cuts and a worsening of working conditions and wages.

However, the trade unions and the Works Council delegates used the protesting workers as a backdrop for their opportunistic speeches and toothless appeals to management. Several union speakers who warned about the consequences of the restructuring had, in fact, agreed to it as members of the company's supervisory board.

The main speakers at the protest were Bertin Eichler, from the IG Metall executive committee and a deputy chair of the ThyssenKrupp supervisory board, and Detlef Wetzel, the IG Metall's second chair, and Thomas Schlenz, chair of the company-wide Works Council, who also sits on the supervisory board.

Greetings were also brought from Mayor Adolf Sauerland (Christian Democratic Union) and one of his predecessors, Josef Krings (Social Democratic Party), who had been invited to the protest. Since the struggles against the closure of the Krupp steel plant in Rheinhausen it has also become customary to invite church representatives to offer their solidarity and sympathy.

As reported by the World Socialist Web Site, the so-called

“workers' representatives” on the supervisory board have tried to mask their agreement to the restructuring measures by citing the noncommittal “position paper” agreed with management. But the worthlessness of this document was confirmed just minutes after the supervisory board meeting by company chief Ekkehard Schulz, who told the press that ThyssenKrupp could not give any guarantees that there would be no factory closures or compulsory redundancies.

The background to the planned measures is a collapse in orders due to the world economic crisis. As the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) on-line wrote on April 6: “The steel market has been knocked off beam. Local steel production is at a bare minimum. All around the globe, orders are lacking. In Germany, nearly one in two steelworkers was on short-time working in March [...]

“The collapse began last autumn, with orders falling and production being cut back. Since December, German raw steel production has decreased by 30 percent month on month. New orders in the first quarter of 2009 are at best just a third as high as 2008 and many companies also face the cancellation of earlier orders. After six fat years, nearly all of the approximately 100 steel producers in Germany are now losing money. So far there have not been any cut backs in permanent staff, but already more than 10,000 sub-contractors have been sent home.”

The steel boom of the last number of years, which saw an almost insatiable demand, above all from China, is finally over; and profits are now shrinking. Under these conditions, the plan of the ThyssenKrupp management to expand production by building a new steel plant in Brazil and a new stainless-steel plant in Alabama has turned into a millstone.

The speakers at the April 6 union rally repeatedly deplored “management mistakes,” by which they meant the decisions to build the new plants in Brazil and Alabama. But they showed no concerns for workers in Brazil or Alabama, who will no longer have the hoped for jobs.

Several speakers referred to the “position paper” and deplored the “broken promises”. Speakers quoted the demands contained within the paper: no compulsory redundancies, priority to short-time working, protection for the earnings of those facing short-time working; no reduction in incomes; the

protection of all plants; scrutiny of all outsourcing projects (and instead seeking more internal orders throughout the group); maintenance of all apprenticeships and the employment of qualified apprentices.

But there was one demand which clearly lay closest to the hearts of all the speakers: “*Mitbestimmung* [co-determination] must be preserved at all costs. We will oppose every attack on it!” This refers to Germany’s corporatist labour relations system, which guarantees parity to so-called “employee representatives” on important company bodies, such as the supervisory board and the Works Councils, providing many well-paid jobs to union bureaucrats.

In his speech, Eichler explained very clearly the form in which such “employee representation” should remain in the new divisions of the company following restructuring.

“By the next supervisory board meeting on May 13, 2009, the directors should provide a detailed plan for preserving the rights of the employee representatives and present this to the supervisory board for agreement.” In other words, the chief concern of the “workers’ delegates” is to maintain their positions and leverage with management.

The speakers made their agreement to the restructuring proposals contingent on the defense of the union’s positions, and threatened more protests if management would not accept that.

However, company officials would not have been frightened by IG Metal deputy chairman Wetzel’s demagoguery: “We will fight for our jobs. For our company, for our ThyssenKrupp. For every plant and each individual job. And we are creative! We can easily visit the Villa Hügel [the former residence of the industrial tycoon, Alfred Krupp and his family is now an exhibition and cultural centre]! But then we won’t pay any entrance fee! And we won’t be coming to look at the art works on display! We have enough ideas. And we have the power. But don’t let it get to that, and treat us decently.”

In view of this agenda and the past experiences of the workforce, the unease of the ThyssenKrupp workers as they listened to the speeches was only too understandable.

The mood of most of the Thyssen employees at the rally was marked by restrained anger and uncertainty towards the perspectives of the IG Metall. This was clear in comments workers made to the WSWS, and in their interest in the programme of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG, Socialist Equality Party) in the European elections. The whistles of support and applause were mainly concentrated among those who stood immediately in front of the podium.

The reasons for this scepticism are easy to understand if one looks at the record. Thousands of jobs in the steel industry and shipyards have been destroyed in recent years. The last serious crisis in the steel industry cost many jobs, particularly in the Ruhr area. At the high point of the crisis in 1992, global steel production sank by just ten percent, but in only two years more than 60,000 jobs were destroyed out of a workforce at that time

of some 206,000.

All the jobs were destroyed despite large protest meetings, demonstrations, torch-lit parades, sit-down protests on the motorways, and in the case of Rheinhausen, a factory occupation. The fact that the so-called “workers’ delegates” of the IG Metall sat on the supervisory boards and even enjoyed parity within the leading bodies of the steel and coal industries did not save a single job.

On the contrary, this made it easier to shed jobs, since every contract to dismantle jobs also carried the signature of IG Metall. The current demand that there should be no compulsory redundancies expresses how IG Metall would like to see the jobs go. With 85,000 employees, destroying thousands of jobs is possible by means of voluntary redundancies, part-time working and early retirement for older employees. But none of these jobs will be replaced. What future is there for the youth if older workers leave but there is no work there for the young?

In light of this fact, Detlef Wetzel’s comment sounds ominous: “We are ready to help with the new arrangements. We are also prepared to take the difficult road ... a company has never been successfully restructured against the workforce.”

In his speech, Wetzel quoted the FAZ, which claimed that steelworkers “Have not recognized the sign of the times.” The right-wing newspaper called the steelworkers’ protest in Duisburg a “kindergarten revolt.” This exposes the class standpoint of the newspaper, which comes as no surprise. Steelworkers face the companies and media who defend job and wage cuts, but they simultaneously confront the IG Metall bureaucrats, who strike public poses against the “conservatives,” but are only too happy to connive against the interests of the workers with these very same conservatives later behind closed doors.

One must say this very clearly: As long as resistance to the planned attacks on jobs, wages and conditions remains under the control of the trade unions and the Works Councils, it is doomed to failure.

Such demonstrations must be made the starting point for organizing real resistance, independently of the trade unions and the establishment parties. The current crisis and its threat to jobs is a crisis of capitalism as a whole. It can only be resolved on a socialist basis by organizing production according to the needs of the mass of working people and not the profits of a few.



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