

Germany: IG Metall accepts job cuts at KBA Frankenthal

Our correspondents
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This week, the IG Metall (Industrial Union of Metalworkers) agreed to the slashing of 142 jobs at manufacturer König & Bauer (KBA) in Frankenthal, in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate. On Tuesday night, management and IG Metall (IGM) signed a framework agreement that basically amounts to closing the Frankenthal plant.

According to the agreement:

- The production of folding machines will be shifted to Würzburg.
- In Frankenthal, the company will be converted into two new companies.
- 142 of the remaining 650 jobs will be cut, with further reductions to be announced.
- The two new companies will operate until 2016. After this date, production in Frankenthal can be shut down entirely, i.e., the company will be subject to “closure in installments”—precisely the scenario workers have attempted to prevent through strike action.

Workers from the plant have been on strike for six weeks, carrying out demonstrations in Frankenthal and throughout the region. To quote IG Metall spokesperson Gunter Hoetzel, the agreement is a “suitable compromise.” While making possible the layoff of hundreds of workers, the union is celebrating that they have negotiated better compensation terms for the sacked workers.

Just 10 years ago, more than 1,200 worked in Frankenthal. When the gravure print division was sold off, leading to the loss of half the workforce, the remaining workers were assured that at least 605 jobs were safe until the end of 2011. With the new agreement even this promise has been broken.

On Tuesday, workers at KBA Frankenthal demonstrated at the Frankfurt airport, where

negotiations were taking place. Only two buses were allowed to travel to the airport facilities and security insisted that the workers could sport their banners and red caps only at the location assigned to them for their rally.

The prevailing tense atmosphere and the noise of horns and bugles made any sort of reasonable discussion impossible. Apparently, union leaders had organized the demonstration to allow the workers to “let off steam”.

However, workers at the protest spoke to the WSWs about the consequences should KBA Frankenthal close down. “We practically have no chance to find a new job”, one worker said. Another one pointed out: “The bosses solve their problems on the backs of their employees”.

Those present reacted positively to the notion of international cooperation between workers against the attacks of global companies. One worker spoke about the protests of US workers earlier this year in Wisconsin.

Ninety percent of the workers at KBA Frankenthal are union members and 95 percent had agreed to begin an open-ended strike. But now they have been sold out by the union, which has accepted the gradual closure of the Frankenthal plant. In decades of close cooperation with employers, IG Metall has signed every type of foul compromise and betrayed the workers’ interests again and again.

IG Metall officials have continually claimed that their hands are tied. “The works council cannot prevent measures” by management, IG Metall Ludwigshafen-Frankenthal wrote on its web site. “It can only negotiate for a social plan to ease social hardships and disadvantages.”

Helga Schwitzer, managing member of the IGM

board, explained that the reduction of jobs could not be avoided, because “in our economic system, owners have the authority”.

Union officials have also systematically hindered workers from linking up their struggles with those of workers from other plants. Strikes of printers and journalists took place at the same time as the Frankenthal printing machine dispute. In Frankfurt, for example, printers and editors of the *Frankfurter Societätsdruckerei* and the daily *Frankfurter Rundschau* are involved in a labor dispute.



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