

Protest strike hits Airbus in Germany

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About 11,000 employees of the aircraft manufacturer Airbus mounted protest strikes on Friday, 7 October. Work was halted almost all day, with early, late and night shifts all affected. According to the unions, about 8,000 workers were involved in strikes in Hamburg, 2,000 in Bremen, 1,200 in Stade, and 200 in Buxtehude.

Airbus is Europe's largest aircraft manufacturer; the company's headquarters are located in Toulouse, France, with manufacturing plants in France, Germany, Spain and Britain. It is a subsidiary of European aerospace and defence group EADS. In 2010 its 52,000 employees generated sales of €27.6 billion.

About 16,000 workers are employed by Airbus in Germany. There are also 4,800 contract workers, some of whom have been with the company for 7 to 8 years, according to the IG Metall trade union. Others are employed on specific contracts or work for subcontractors.

Airbus is in strong competition with the US company, Boeing. The two are currently the world's largest producers of passenger aircraft.

The IG Metall had called for the protest strike after one and a half years of negotiations with Airbus management failed to reach any conclusion about a "future collective agreement for 2012-2020." The current contract at Airbus expires later this year.

In the new contract, the Airbus works council and IG Metall are seeking to enshrine an employment and job security programme until 2020, the hiring of apprentices, as well as having more say in the use of temporary workers, work organization and optimization processes.

In return, Airbus management is demanding an eight percent annual increase in productivity, which would lead to an enormous intensification of stress at work.

At present, the Hamburg factory produces 21 A320 aircraft each month. Management aims to increase this

to 25 aircraft from late 2012. It also plans to use large numbers of temp workers, amounting to some 20 percent of the workforce, on the production of new aircraft types.

The workforce cannot reasonably be expected to accept increases at this level, according to the district head of the IG Metall coastal region, Meinhard Geiken: "In many areas, they are already working on the brink of what is possible". Nevertheless, representatives of IG Metall and the works council have offered productivity increases of two percent. This would produce cost savings of €120 million per year and over €1.1 billion by 2020.

On 23 September, management representatives called off the negotiations and threatened to relocate production abroad if the IG Metall and works council made no further concessions. They also tried to have the threatened protest strike banned, applying for an injunction to the Frankfurt Labour Court. The court rejected the application but left open the possibility of an appeal to the Hesse state Labour Court.

The high participation in the strike is an expression of workers' concerns about their job security and the high work pressures on the production line, which threaten health, quality and ultimately aircraft safety. Strikers also rejected the fact that temporary workers do the same work under worse conditions and under constant fear of losing their jobs.

Another problem is the high proportion of outsourced production, awarded to companies who submit the lowest bids. Seventy to ninety percent of disruption to production is due to outsourcing problems.

IG Metall writes: "Many people complain that they only mainly manage foreign orders and control foreign companies ... But the company insists on employing a quota of 20 percent temporary workers. Much of the work is already completed either by foreign firms or under temporary work contracts."

Nevertheless, the IG Metall is not demanding that temporary workers—half of whom have worked at Airbus for more than 2 years—be hired on permanent contracts. Instead, it wants to force a cut in the number of such agency workers by 15 percent in the new contract.

While Airbus workers went on strike against these intolerable conditions and are ready to take further action, the representatives of the trade unions and the works council are focused on securing their own privileged positions in the company. Though they know that work pressures are already too high, they have put forward suggestions for productivity increases.

The many contracts signed by the IG Metall at various companies in recent years that were supposed to secure employment and production have not saved a single job. At the same time, workers in the companies affected by such agreements have had to make concessions on wages, accept longer working hours, and make other sacrifices.

The IG Metall and the works councils also try to play off workers at the various locations against each other. IG Metall chief negotiator Daniel Frederick reportedly responded to the threat that production would be relocated with the words: “If the German management openly threatens with relocation to France, this really takes the cake. If this threat proves true, it’s down tools, and nothing will leave here.”

There is a dirty record of unions playing off French and German workers against each other at Airbus. The last major cuts programme at Airbus, called Power 8, was pushed through using such nationalist methods. At that time, Airbus had announced it was cutting 10,000 jobs across Europe, to save billions of euros in costs and increase the firm’s profits.

When this programme was announced in late February 2007, Airbus workers in France and Germany stopped work and spontaneously went on strike. *Force Ouvrière* union bureaucrats in France tried to whip up sentiments against workers in Germany, claiming that the plants in France were more productive, and therefore there should be more job cuts in Germany than in France.

The German works councils and IG Metall responded in kind, claiming that “German Airbus plants were at least as productive as the French ones, and sometimes even more productive”.

All the unions were hostile to a cross-border struggle to unconditionally defend jobs. Isolated protest strikes and demonstrations were used to let off steam, without actually threatening Airbus.

The French and German unions’ nationalist policies enabled Airbus to implement the cuts contained in Power 8 and now put management in a position to press further demands on the workers. The recent protest strike at Airbus also served primarily to blow off steam before the union signs up to a new contract, which will further exacerbate the stresses at work.

Just four days after the strike, *Norddeutsche Rundfunk* reported that there were new talks with Airbus: “Both Airbus and the IG Metall are confident of reaching an agreement to the conflict that has lasted eighteen months.”

After top-level talks between Airbus Germany chief Günter Butschek, personnel manager Joachim Sauer and Airbus’s overall works council chair John Dahnken and IG Metall chief negotiator Daniel Frederick, the two sides then reached “a basic agreement on the essential points”, as IG Metall spokesman Heiko Messerschmidt confirmed.

However, both sides have agreed to remain silent until all details are agreed upon.



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