

Germany: Angry Manroland workers protest against job losses

Our correspondents
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Several thousand workers at Manroland, the third largest printing press manufacturer in the world, demonstrated last Thursday at plants in Augsburg, Offenbach and Plauen in defence of their jobs.

Some 1,200 Manroland workers from the Offenbach plant rallied outside the Frankfurt headquarters of the Allianz Insurance Company, whose subsidiary Allianz Capital Partners (ACP) holds the largest proportion of Manroland shares. The IG Metall union is demanding that ACP provide €300 million to ensure the financial security of Manroland.

On November 25, Manroland filed for bankruptcy protection with the Augsburg district court, making it the largest business collapse in Germany in the past two years. On its web site, the company justified the filing by pointing to the financial crisis and the “dramatic drop in orders since July 2011.”

The bankruptcy places 6,600 jobs at risk, including 2,400 in Augsburg, 1,900 in Offenbach and 900 in Plauen. Wages for November were not paid. Among those affected are hundreds of apprentices.

The workers carried banners with slogans such as “Hopefully NOT Insured by Allianz,” and “We Demand a Future from Allianz.” Manroland, the largest private employer in Offenbach, has been building printing machinery for over 160 years.

Many workers are angry at the lack of any advance warning and the overall tactics being employed to possibly put an end to this long-standing firm.

Workers have made big sacrifices in recent years in the hope of securing their jobs. For over three years they have been on short-time and for two years they have gone without their Christmas bonuses and holiday pay. Despite this, Manroland has eliminated over 2,200 jobs over this period.

In contrast to the militancy of the workers in

defending their jobs, IG Metall and the works council used the rally outside Allianz headquarters to portray themselves as better managers. Armin Schild, head of IG Metall in Hesse, called on management to “elaborate an industrial strategy in conjunction with the works council and the union.” He declared, “We know how Manroland works.”

IG Metall is placing its hopes on the Hesse state government, a coalition of the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and neo-liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP). IG Metall representatives have called on the state government “to be active in saving Offenbach.”

Schild told the *Frankfurter Rundschau* that IG Metall had been holding talks with the state government for weeks, since it had been clear for some time that Manroland was in difficult straits.

Schild’s words confirm that IG Metall has known for some time about the impending insolvency. While maintaining close contact with management and the state government, it has kept this knowledge from the workforce.

According to IG Metall, a November 15 meeting of the company supervisory board, on which the union sits, discussed a report on the “strategic reorganisation” of Manroland. The union then agreed to a confidentiality pledge. Clearly, the “strategic reorganisation” was to be tied down behind the scenes and the workforce presented with a *fait accompli*.

While many workers at the protest rally were outraged by management’s surprise attack in the form of the bankruptcy proceedings, it is now clear that this approach was worked out in collaboration with IG Metall. The company wanted to keep the workforce calm and prevent any struggle in defence of jobs because its strategy is based on finding new buyers for

the individual plants.

“We must find an investor by Christmas or our time will run out,” IG Metall Executive Committee member Jürgen Kerner, who is also the vice chair of the Manroland supervisory board, told the *Augsburger Allgemeine*. He added: “If necessary, the works council members and representatives of IG Metall will get in their cars to hold talks with potential investors.”

In the same interview, Kerner emphasized the willingness of IG Metall to sacrifice workers’ jobs and benefits. He said, “We believe that the former shareholders of Manroland and Allianz should cough up some money one last time, especially since the staff have made new concessions and further job losses are possible.”

IG Metall has not the slightest intention of conducting a serious struggle to defend jobs. It is suggesting the Offenbach plant be spun off from the rest of the company.

The Offenbach factory produces sheet-fed printing presses while the Augsburg plant mainly produces machinery for the ailing newspaper industry. This is why IG Metall regards it as more likely that a new investor can be found if potential buyers are offered the Offenbach plant with its workforce and capacity without having to worry about what happens to the Augsburg operation.

IG Metall’s approach means dividing up the Manroland workers between the three sites.

Marita Weber, the Offenbach district leader of IG Metall, and Works Council Chair Alexandra Weber Rossel told the press that there had to be an end to attempts by the failed Manroland management to shift production and know-how to Augsburg from southern Hesse.

It was not by chance that the main IG Metall banner read: “We Rolanders are Fighting for Our Plant and Our Jobs in Offenbach.”

A team of reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with numerous Manroland workers at the demonstration. Many were very dissatisfied with IG Metall.

Adam Hussli, with 38 years at Manroland, said, “The dealings with Allianz were dragged out and kept secret far too long. How do they plan to save the company now in eight weeks?” Hussli worked for decades on the assembly line and was recently transferred to quality

control. “Allianz bought up 75 percent (of Manroland),” he said. “Now they are letting us starve.”

Hussli is not a member of IG Metall, belonging instead to the Christian trade union. “They’re all the same,” he told the WSWS. “The unions have concealed things for too long. This is a competition between German printing press manufacturers. Manroland, Heidelberg and König & Bauer are up against each other. Workers cannot allow themselves to be played off against each other. We must all stick together. You can see that the willingness to do this is there.”

Andreas, with twelve years at the Mühlheimerstraße factory, fears he will soon have to find a new job. He was not, however, surprised by the bankruptcy filing.

“The thing has been planned for some time. It’s a stitch-up,” he told the WSWS. He too has no confidence in IG Metall. “They’re all in cahoots,” he said.

Ramazan has been working at Manroland for 22 years. When he started in 1989, the company had a total of more than 10,000 employees.

“IG Metall thinks we are stupid,” said Ramazan. “They asked us two years ago if we were willing to forgo our Christmas bonus and holiday pay. But 60 percent were opposed. Despite that, IG Metall agreed to it. Why did they need our signatures? That’s like in kindergarten.

“But it’s no longer a game! Two thousand jobs have already been eliminated. We all have families. What do the management think they’re doing? We are the ones who produce things and they live off our money.”

Simultaneous with the protest in Offenbach and Frankfurt, 2,000 workers took part in a demonstration in Augsburg and 1,000 in Plauen.



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