

Germany: Fierce debates at Manroland in Offenbach

Our reporters
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Many workers at printing press manufacturers Manroland fear that the IG Metall union is willing to accept the conditions demanded by a Chinese investor: breaking away the plant in Offenbach and taking over only a portion of the workforce. According to the *Augsburger Allgemeine*, the Chinese conglomerate Shanghai Electric is especially interested in acquiring modern sheet-fed technology, but will not take on any “legacy” in the form of higher pension entitlements and other benefits.

Employees based at the company’s plants in Augsburg and Plauen are also afraid that the IG Metall has agreed to breaking up the company, which would lead to playing one location off against another.

It is now known that IG Metall officials had long been aware of the company’s insolvency plans but kept this information secret from the workforce right to the last moment. Even now the union is providing no information about any discussions it is having and what concessions it is prepared to accept. It has not organized any serious industrial struggle to defend all jobs in all locations because it regards this as an obstacle to finding a new investor.

At the same time, it is increasingly clear that the bankruptcy at Manroland is part of a general attack on jobs and social achievements. The largest German insolvency in years, its implications extend far beyond Manroland and threaten the existence of workers throughout the entire German printing press industry and its suppliers.

This is made clear by the statements of the insolvency administrator, Werner Schneider. In an interview with *Antenne Bayern*, Schneider mentioned a merger of the three largest corporations—Manroland, Heidelberger Druckmaschinen and Koenig & Bauer—as a possible solution to the crisis, but that no matter what the solution there would be fewer jobs. “The bankruptcy also does not mean that superfluous jobs are suddenly justified”, said Schneider. What he meant by “superfluous jobs” he did not say.

Schneider told *Die Welt* he was in contact with financial

investors “who specialize in the acquisition of ailing companies”. Company representatives apparently intend to keep only those areas and products that are competitive on world markets, and are ready to dump any unprofitable “legacy”. According to this logic, the permanent, well-paid jobs of skilled workers are a burden.

Schneider said of Manroland, “It will be rather difficult to find an investor the way the company is currently set up”. He hoped that buyers could be found for parts of the group. “As separate entities”, he said, “one can easily imagine meaningful alliances and constellations.”

The IG Metall would obviously support a so-called “re-organisation” of the industry. In Offenbach on Wednesday, IG Metall representative Marita Weber called for an “overall concept for the engineering division, including the two competing companies Heidelberger Druck and Koenig & Bauer”. In November, Heidelberger Druckmaschinen AG placed one in two employees on short-time working, and announced mass layoffs; Koenig & Bauer dismissed several hundred workers last summer.

In the meantime, IG Metall is seeking to “let off steam” through organising local protests. On Thursday afternoon in Offenbach, they called on the workforce to attend a two-hour rally in the city, where they released red balloons.

However, many workers are concerned by the question of how jobs can be defended.

The Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) received much support outside the gates of Manroland when it distributed a *World Socialist Web Site* flyer about the bankruptcy and the role of the union. (See “Manroland: The defence of jobs and the role of the German trade unions”) Hundreds of workers took copies of the flyer and several stayed and talked about their own experiences. Many have worked for decades in the factory, and some reported that they had already experienced the plant closure in neighbouring Mainhausen.

The WSWS statement elaborates an independent perspective for the working class: jobs can only be defended through the establishment of “factory and action

committees that are completely independent of the unions”. These committees “must make contact with workers at other companies threatened with closure and undertake measures to ensure the democratic control of production.”

The unions, it states, “offer only new concessions. They are eager to sacrifice jobs, wages and benefits in order to woo new investors on the basis of ‘competitiveness’. Whoever makes competitiveness in the context of the capitalist profit system his first principle, however, must inevitably endorse the most oppressive forms of exploitation—up to and including child labour.”

Unlike many workers, some of the IG Metall representatives and shop stewards reacted angrily to the article. On Wednesday, when WSWS reporters sought to attend a meeting of Manroland shop stewards in Offenbach they were called “splitters” and banned from the room.

One of them complained: “You are driving a wedge between the workers and the IG Metall”, and cited as evidence, of all things, where the WSWS handout states: “In order to combat the splitting tactics of the union, which plays off one factory against another, coordinated strikes must be organised across Europe and beyond.” One shop steward complained that he had come directly from the Manroland factory where the WSWS leaflet had already caused a stir. He said he had found it hard to defend the position of the IG Metall in front of the workers.

The same evening, the perspectives of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party were discussed at a meeting near the Manroland factory in Offenbach. PSG chair Ulrich Rippert explained why it was a matter of principle to defend all jobs in all locations: “The right to work and a fair wage is a fundamental right and cannot be subordinated to the profit interests of management and the liquidators”.

Therefore it was necessary to set up action committees and to prepare a plant occupation. Rippert said, “I do not speak of a symbolic action, a few red flags at the main gate and limited protests with radical speeches, but a serious occupation and strike, aimed at including the other plants and all those facing dismissal as part of a broad resistance.”

The bankruptcy must be understood for what it is: part of a social counter-revolution, aimed at smashing all the social concessions that the ruling class was forced to make after the Second World War, such as sick pay, pensions, accident insurance and social security, maternity leave, etc.

Everyone knows where such a development leads. “The immediate consequence of the global economic crisis in the late 1920s was fascist dictatorship and war.” Rippert stressed that this was why the defence of jobs could not be subordinated to IG Metall and its policy of defending “local” production and social partnership.

A brave and determined fight would send a powerful

signal to other workers who were in the same position, such as those at EON, RWE, Nokia, Axa, Ferro Steel, Postbank and many other businesses currently affected by mass layoffs and the destruction of rights. The aim must be to build a broad political movement directed against the policy of social cuts that is currently dictated by the banks.

“Such a movement must follow two basic programmatic goals: first, it must be directed against the capitalist system, that is, it must follow a socialist perspective. And secondly, it must be international, which means cooperating with workers throughout Europe and the world”, said Rippert.

The speech sparked a lively discussion. The central question: how could the battle for jobs be conducted despite—or perhaps because of—the acute crisis of capitalism.

There was agreement that a fundamental struggle was necessary and legitimate in order to protect jobs. One participant said: “The workers have built everything, set up the machines, the production lines, the factories and the know-how, right up to factory safety. If all this is destroyed, then defence can only be understood as an emergency action”.

A message of greetings from an employee of global press manufacturer Goss International was read to the meeting, winning a warm response. “The ‘right to property’ claimed by the owners of capital,” it states, “is the right to destroy jobs. It is not compatible with the right of workers to a job with good pay”.

One participant pointed out that even now, unemployment in Offenbach stands at about 10 percent. In the state of Hesse, it is the town with the second highest unemployment. In Augsburg and Plauen, as well as in Offenbach, the Manroland bankruptcy will dramatically worsen workers’ social situation. It will drag into the crisis many others currently working for contractors and suppliers.

For example, Gefinal Systema in the neighbouring town of Mainhausen has also announced bankruptcy. Gefinal received over 95 percent of its orders from Manroland. In Offenbach, Manroland is the largest private employer. Currently, 179 companies in Offenbach have introduced short-time working, twice as many as four years ago.



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