

Germany: Manroland workers protest job cuts

Our reporters
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Last week, several thousand Manroland workers in Wiesbaden and Plauen demonstrated to defend their jobs. This followed the announcement by liquidators that there would be massive job cuts at the printing press manufacturer.

The workers participating in the protests directed their anger not only against the management and the insolvency administrator Werner Schneider. Many were highly critical of the IG Metall trade union. In the seven weeks since the insolvency proceedings began, the union has failed to organize a single joint action by the workforce from all three of its sites.

Originally a joint demonstration of all three workforces had been planned in Munich for Friday to take place outside the headquarters of the Allianz Group, the present owners of Manroland. However, last Monday, following a no-commitment pledge of €24 million by Allianz and Manroland for alternative employment schemes, IG Metall promptly called off the already largely planned and organized protest.

This aroused strong opposition in the workforce. “They’re all in it together”, complained a mechanic who works in the finishing department at the Plauen plant. Instead of a joint demonstration in Munich, separate demonstrations were held at each location on Friday.

Plauen

There was heavy snowfall as approximately 400 workers and apprentices gathered in Plauen, and an icy wind blew through the “greatest city in the Vogtland region” in southwest Saxony. Twenty-three years ago, on October 7, 1989, the city had seen its first major demonstration against the Stalinist regime of East Germany.

Some of those demonstrating now in 2012 had been employed at “Plamag”, the factory where the world’s first web offset press had been built in 1912, and which was then taken over by Manroland in 1990. Many had thought the reunification of Germany would turn out differently.

IG Metall officials had nothing to offer in their speeches, except to urge “Hope for an investor” and a social plan for “those who are laid off”. They appealed to the conscience “of those responsible in the management team”—who by filing for bankruptcy had already demonstrated their lack of conscience—and painted a bleak picture.

The leading IG Metall district official in Zwickau, Stefan Kademann, said: “If the company goes it would be terrible for the region, which has already been plagued by depopulation and a lack of industrial jobs”. The Manroland operation in Plauen is the largest industrial enterprise in the Vogtland region.

The Plauen factory is threatened with massive job cuts. According to

Kademann, IG Metall assumes that a considerable number of jobs there will fall victim to the insolvency proceedings. The 20 percent job cuts spoken of by the liquidator would “definitely not be enough”, he said. Soon there would only be as many people employed as the order book allowed.

An apprentice taking part in the demonstration said, “For Plauen and Vogtland, closure would be devastating. A few would probably find another job, but for most this is not an option. It is clear that the trade unions are not conducting a fight.”

Another apprentice said, “I don’t know where the younger generation is heading; it’s not just jobs, but apprenticeships that are going. The best thing would be to defend all jobs. I was looking for two years until I found an apprenticeship.”

“One can only hope, but we must fight,” he continued. “There are more people getting richer, and many more becoming poorer. We should do something about that. There is a deep gulf, which should not be.”

The demonstration also attracted lively interest from passers-by. A young woman thought that the job cuts and possible closure were “frankly impossible”. Manroland was a very large company, the job cuts would also hit other companies in the region adversely, she said. “Then other people would be laid off. A real labour struggle, a strike or a factory occupation, I would certainly support that.”

A young demonstrator, who does not work at Manroland, said: “I’m here to show solidarity. Many will be unemployed if Manroland is closed. Then the employment office will have plenty to do.”

Another young worker said, “It’s not just about Plauen, but also the Vogtland region and Saxony. The future of many other people will be destroyed. It is wrong that not only this company but also many others stand alone and are being ruined.”

Wiesbaden

About a thousand workers from the Offenbach Manroland plant had come to the Hesse state capital Wiesbaden to demonstrate against the sell-off of their factory. However, they had no confidence in the perspective of IG Metall and the works council, which, in alliance with the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Left Party, was encouraging illusions in the Hesse state government, a coalition of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and Free Democratic Party (FDP).

Under the motto, “Help us finally in our need, provide the money or Manroland is dead”, the demonstrators marched from the train station to the Hesse state chancellery, the seat of the state government. A second slogan of IG Metall said: “Politicians hear the signal, we Manrolanders need the money for a social plan”. The main purpose of the action

initiated by the trade union, evidently, was to pressure the state government to provide funds for redundancies.

Demonstrators told the WSWS what they expect in the coming weeks. They fear that of the 1,900 jobs in Offenbach, 60 percent will be eliminated, i.e., more than 1,100. The money paid by the employment agency from the insolvency fund will run out on January 31.

For a transitional period, a transfer company will be established. However, for most of those affected this would only represent a short period of full-time unemployment. Salaries are to be downgraded by three income groups. Finally, length of service for workers—in some cases amounting to decades at the company—is to be set at zero, which will save on future severance payments.

Speakers from IG Metall, the SPD and Left Party who addressed the demonstrators made submissive appeals to the state government, and played off the Offenbach site against the other two locations in Augsburg and Plauen.

The first to speak, Torsten Schäfer-Gümbel, chair of the SPD in Hesse, said, “The sloth of the state government is unacceptable. In Bavaria and Saxony [where the other plants are located], the issue is top priority.” He called for an intervention by State Premier Volker Bouffier (CDU), whose government should provide funding for the Offenbach site.

Janine Wissler, chair of the Left Party in the state parliament and a member of the Marx21 grouping, stressed that the industrial location of Offenbach must be preserved at all costs. Clearly, the other two sites were not as close to her heart. Instead, she complained that the owners would evade their responsibility, just like the “politicians”—by which she meant the CDU and FDP in the federal and state parliaments.

Wissler concluded by wishing the workers “good luck, a lot of patience and a lot of pressure”—a completely cynical remark given the pressure effectively bearing down on many workers, who now find themselves confronted with the threat of unemployment.

Armin Schild, regional head of the IG Metall, complained that other state governments were doing more for workers than the administration in Hesse. He said the state government in Thuringia was doing everything possible to keep industry in the region. In Rhineland-Palatinate, Premier Kurt Beck (SPD) was “closely involved” in the labour struggles at printing press manufacturer KBA in Frankenthal. He had even “stood outside the factory gates”. (At KBA, with the participation of IG Metall, 1,500 jobs have been eliminated in Germany.)

Now it was the state government’s responsibility to ensure the necessary “transfer companies” were established for those who could no longer be employed at Manroland, Schild demanded. In other words, a loss of jobs is already a done deal for the IG Metall.

Works council chair Alexandra Rossel passed the buck onto the European Union. Brussels had not yet decided on a request for guarantees—“wasting time we don’t have”, she exclaimed, apparently in horror. But the works council knows exactly what it means to play for time—since, together with the union, they had kept the insolvency plans secret from the workforce until the very last.

While appeals to the state government were heard from the official platform, many protesters expressed to the WSWS their discontent with all political parties. Many were angry about IG Metall’s cancellation of the joint demonstration in Munich.

“Most of us would have happily travelled to Munich”, said one worker, declining to give his name. “But for the little money we are now getting [from Allianz], we have been sold out.” A colleague agreed: “Together, we would have represented a force.” Asked about the role of the trade unions and works council, he added, “Do you really think they did not know what was going on a year ago? All this here is only play-acting.”

Many interested passersby stopped and asked the workers why they were demonstrating. IG Metall had not even produced a flyer for

distribution at the rally, and it was left to the workers themselves to explain what was happening. Even beforehand, the union had wrapped the planned demonstration in a cloak of silence, apparently for fear of unleashing a wider movement.

As in the past few weeks, the perspectives of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) met with a wide response. PSG members distributed hundreds of leaflets calling for the establishment of factory committees and committees of action, which would organize the occupation of the factories threatened with closure and the defence of the production lines.

One worker said: “Your flyer is being discussed by us—it is simply telling the truth. I’ll distribute some on the bus. All of your flyers are up on our bulletin board. Several of our colleagues want to write to you.”

When asked what he thought about the organizers of the demonstration, he replied, “The IG Metall and the works council just want to save their own jobs. Where was Huber [IG Metall chair]? And Rainer Herth, who likes to talk big in the works council? Where was he today?”

Augsburg

Manroland’s largest site, in Augsburg, employs about 2,400. The majority of the workforce have been on short-time working since March 2010. Savings measures were introduced at the same time—including job cuts, reductions in holiday and Christmas bonuses, and reductions in overtime pay. During this period, more than 400 jobs have been eliminated in Augsburg.

In contrast to Plauen and Wiesbaden, the unions did not organize an official protest in Augsburg. WSWS reporters spoke to employees outside the Augsburg plant.

Werner, 46, has been employed in production for 16 years at Augsburg. The threat of bankruptcy and layoffs has hit him and his colleagues hard. “Especially the older of us will find it hard to get another job in the current situation. And certainly not a well-paid one. This is a disaster for us”, said the trained mechanic.

“The management has told us repeatedly that our jobs were safe if we all make a sacrifice. And we have done so since being on short-time working”, he continued. “The trade union and works council have told us we must do everything possible to protect jobs, and that we will be fully employed again after the short-time working.”

Werner was also angry with the union for cancelling the demonstration in Munich originally planned. “Together with our colleagues from Plauen and Offenbach, we could have made clear that you can’t just push us around. Our colleagues in Plauen are much worse off than us. Unemployment there is much higher than here. Leaving every plant to fend for itself will certainly not force management to reconsider.”

Gaby, 44, employed for nine years in administration, described the mood in the factory as tense. “My colleagues are all sad, disappointed and angry”, she said. “Such well-paid work would not be found as quickly, if at all. Many colleagues who have a family or have to pay off a loan fear losing their jobs.” The cuts in Christmas and holiday bonuses had been “a bitter blow” for the workforce, she said. “But we accepted it because we thought that would keep our jobs.”

Gaby is angry about the role of the unions. “I resigned three years ago from the union. You can see that they achieve nothing. They would rather negotiate with the management than fight with us.” She was also upset by the cancellation of the mass demonstration in Munich. “Why have they cancelled the demonstration today? Just so their negotiations are not disrupted.”



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