

Manroland employees in Plauen: “We have been lied to and cheated”

Ernst Wolff
13 January 2012

“Factory closure is out of the question!” This is the pithy slogan on a poster printed by the IG Metall trade union which can be found in all the trams in the city of Plauen. The slogan refers to the bankruptcy proceedings currently being conducted against the printing press manufacturer Manroland, which has three factories in Germany. In front of the Plauen factory the union has set up a large stand which is also decked out with militant slogans.

Manroland workers spoke bitterly of their experiences with IG Metall when questioned by a WSWs reporter team. “We have been lied to and cheated,” says a worker from the logistics sector, who has worked at the company for more than three decades. “Its disgraceful, the way they treat us,” says a younger worker, who has been on the workforce for almost ten years.

“They’re all in cahoots,” declared a fitter from the production finishing line. “They only think of themselves,” he added. A fourth worker who had been trained in the factory and has worked there for over 25 years, said: “For four years They have asked us to keep quiet, and then on Monday they stripped us of the last chance to defend ourselves.”

The source of the workers’ anger was the announcement by the works council and IG Metall officials at a staff meeting on Monday that they were cancelling a demonstration of all Manroland workers due to take place in Munich on Friday. The decision, taken behind the backs of employees, is not the only reason for the workers’ anger. It is only the latest in a long chain of incidents which show that when it comes to stabbing the workforce in the back, the management of Manroland can rely totally on IG Metall.

Four years have passed since the first doubts emerged regarding the future of Manroland. Falling prices, increased competition and the global economic crisis led to growing problems for the company. From the very start IG Metall was well informed about this development. The deputy chairman of Manroland is none other than Jürgen Kerner, formerly the representative of IG Metall in Augsburg and now executive director at its Frankfurt headquarters. However, instead of using his knowledge to educate employees about the dangers ahead and prepare for a fight, Kerner acted as a loyal advisor to senior management.

The problems for the company escalated and the owners of Manroland, the companies MAN and Allianz, demanded drastic measures to stop the decline in profits. In response, the management introduced short-time working, and cut Christmas bonus and holiday pay. Once again IG Metall union acted as consultants in order to ensure that the cuts could be made without encountering resistance.

One leading union official, Stefan Kademann, recommended the staff to accept the measures in order to “save jobs.” This was a promise with fatal consequences—more than a hundred jobs were eliminated in Plauen alone.

Even this, however, was not enough. The market situation for Manroland continued to deteriorate and on November 25, 2011 MAN and Allianz filed for bankruptcy. The decision hit the workforce like a bombshell. IG Metall had agreed a pact of silence with management, while Jürgen Kerner and other IGM

officials were involved for weeks in preparing the bankruptcy.

The consequences of the bankruptcy in a region of East Germany already plagued by mass unemployment are devastating. The company has been in existence since 1896 and is the second largest employer in Plauen.

Recently, the third biggest factory in Plauen, Philips, dismissed 130 of its 440 employees due to a partial relocation to Poland, where production is cheaper. Unemployment in Plauen is over nine percent and the town is suffering from the departure of many young people, who are seeking decent jobs elsewhere.

The loss of their jobs will result in long-term unemployment for many Manroland workers. Many younger workers have declared their intention of trying to find a job in West Germany. Above all, the insolvency will hit the pensions of redundant workers who lose their claim to a company pension in the event of bankruptcy. At the same time the board members of MAN and Allianz will continue to rake in their millions in annual salaries and Jürgen Kerner's own five-figure salary is guaranteed.

Given this grim outlook, tensions were high in the workforce during the Christmas break. In order to vent this discontent, the union organised a demonstration involving the workforces of the three Manroland plants at Augsburg, Offenbach and Plauen. The planned protest in Munich was welcomed by many workers. "It was finally an opportunity to show our strength," declared two young engineers who had looked forward to discussion with colleagues from other plants. It would have "significantly strengthened" militancy. The readiness of workers in the region to fight was already evident at a demonstration held in early December. Many workers from other companies from throughout the region also took part.

Many workers reacted with surprise and indignation after being told at the staff meeting on Monday that the union had called off the demonstration. In particular, workers were angry at the reason given for the cancellation, i.e. that the union did not want to endanger a noncommittal offer from MAN and Allianz to provide financial support for alternative employment

and training schemes. On this basis the union called off the "parade" in Munich in favour of "minor rallies" in Plauen and the other plant locations.

Many workers in the city of Plauen wonder why this promise was first disclosed on Monday. Could it be the case that there were no serious offers of financial help, but instead the union sought desperately to cancel the planned mass demonstration?

The verdict of the workers in Plauen is clear. "The works council and IG Metall assisted management in dividing our resistance," said an engineer who has worked for fifteen years at the plant. "In fact we should immediately go on strike," said another. A colleague pointed out that, "under a pledge of secrecy", IG Metall bureaucrat Stefan Kademmann had told workers in the factory that a strike is impossible, because the "IG Metall in Frankfurt were firmly opposed."

Whether this statement is true or not, it is symptomatic of IG Metall, which plays a dirty double game at Manroland and many other plants: posing as militant at meetings and rallies, then working closely with management behind the backs of the workforce to impose cuts in wages and working conditions.

The IG Metall poster "Factory closure is out of the question!" in Plauen should be replaced with a sign reading "Closure is in the cards—all thanks to IG Metall".



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact