Manroland: “The IG Metall has played a double game”

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For over two thousand Manroland workers January 31 was their last working day. They had received their redundancy notices just one week ago. The layoff toll included 947 in Offenbach, 741 in Augsburg and 348 in Plauen. Many of them had worked for the company for decades.

The dismissed workers were not only angry about losing their jobs, they were also outraged by the humiliating way in which they were informed of their dismissals. In a deal struck between the IG Metall trade union and the bankruptcy administrator, Werner Schneider, employees were left in the dark about their future until the last moment, when each worker was informed of his fate in a sealed envelope.

Schneider and the IG Metall union took advantage of the insecurity and fear among workers to prevent any opposition to layoffs and ensure that production at the company ran smoothly up to the very end.

In just nine weeks, since the announcement of bankruptcy last November, the world’s third largest manufacturer of printing presses, with a 167-year history, has been broken up into parts with sites sold off individually. The company’s web press operation in Augsburg has been taken over by the Possehl Group in Luebeck. The sheet-fed printing machine site in Offenbach has been sold to the British Langley Holding company. The remaining workforce in Plauen is due to continue to supply the Augsburg plant with components for the manufacture of rotary printing machines.

The bankruptcy has freed the company from a number of its legal commitments to workers who have lost many of their entitlements. Manroland workers have not only lost their jobs but also forfeited all claims to compensation. They are to be transferred for half a year into a so-called transfer company, after which unemployment and welfare loom. At the Plamag factory in Plauen, about a hundred former employees who are already in early retirement will forfeit their salaries and will be sent to the labour office.

The situation will also inevitably worsen for those workers who keep their jobs. They will be subject to wage cuts while being expected to carry out a far greater workload. In the company’s Print Technology Center, where potential customers evaluate the current printing presses, 28 workers have been retained from a former total of 56. In the department of research and development, 150 workers have lost their posts and just 200 remain. The former shift system is to be ended as well as the extra payments upon which many workers with families were dependent.

At a staff meeting last Friday in Offenbach, the depleted workforce was informed that the IG Metall had agreed to a “future contract” whereby immediate pay cuts of eight percent were to be enforced. This is under conditions where workers have already yielded up considerable parts of their salary in recent years in response to the threat issued by the union that this was the only way to save the company.

At the Offenbach factory, the liquidator Schneider praised the fact that the reduced company—in future to be known as “Manroland Sheet Fed” will have a considerable competitive advantage because it no longer confronts “risks and pension commitments.” At the Augsburg plant, which will henceforth be called “Manroland Websystems,” the IG Metall has agreed to a wage cut.

“We were really caught off guard,” SG, one of nearly a thousand laid off workers, told the *World Socialist Web Site*. The 57-year-old shift worker has worked at Manroland in Offenbach for more than 40 years. On January 24 his factory overseer presented him and many of his colleagues their notices of dismissal.

SG had received no pay for January and had heard nothing concretely about the ominous transfer company. All that he knew was that the transfer company was to accept dismissed workers for six months. Then they were threatened with unemployment and Hartz IV welfare payments. “When you’ve worked here so long and suddenly find yourself on the street, through no fault of your own, then you feel completely helpless," he reported.

Many of the over two thousand laid off workers have been employed at the company for several decades. In the event of early retirement, they could have anticipated large severance payments. Due to the unexpected insolvency procedure, carried out in close collaboration with the IG Metall, they have lost their entitlements. "No one had time to hire a lawyer to sue for his rights," SG said. Whoever now sought to appeal would have to fight at his own expense, and workers lacked the means to do so.

The IG Metall played a foul role from the start, several workers told us. One said, "They apparently knew for months about the bankruptcy. Of course not every shop steward in the company was informed, although certainly some of them were not willing to admit what was increasingly obvious. We could have fought if we had responded as soon as the bankruptcy was announced. But the works councils and the IG Metall leadership sabotaged any such struggle."

The IG Metall has played a key role in job losses and the destruction of workers' rights won over the course of decades. Already five years ago, when the company was taken over by the investment fund, Allianz Capital Partners, the unions urged workers to accept hundreds of job cuts and accept cuts to wages and Christmas and holiday pay, allegedly to ensure the "future of the factory."

Last year, the IG Metall, whose representatives sit on all leading bodies of the company, kept silent about the impending bankruptcy until it was announced on November 30. Since then the union has consented to the demands of the creditors' committee regarding layoffs and the sell-off of the factories in Augsburg and Offenbach.

In mid-January the union even called off a planned demonstration of workers from all of the company's factories in order not to jeopardize the negotiations with the Possehl Group. A local demonstration in Wiesbaden was restricted to calling upon the Hesse state government to provide tax-payers' money to finance the bankruptcy proceedings.

Today, after completing the break up of the company, the union has declared the current state of affairs to be the "best solution."

"IG Metall and the works council welcomed the unanimous decision of the creditors' committee," declared Marita Weber, the leading representative of IG Metall in Offenbach, following the sell-off of the depleted local factory to the British investor Langley. Although it was a solution for all, it was "the best solution for Offenbach," Weber continued. The same sentiment was echoed by Manroland CEO Jürgen Bänsch, who agreed that the decision in favour of Langley Holdings was best for the Offenbach site.

In the media Langley is also celebrated as a "white knight" riding to the rescue of Manroland Offenbach. "The fear is over," wrote the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and went on to ludicrously compare the investor Langley to Robin Hood.

In reality, the new owners are not interested in the production of printing machines, and certainly not in the future of workers and their families. The *Financial Times Germany* writes about bargain hunter Tony Langley: "He is always on the look out for niche offers in a crisis which are languishing within well-known corporations." Langley has a personal fortune of ?270 million and currently stands at 24th on the list of richest Britons.

Langley refuses to make any guarantees for the Manroland Offenbach site and its workforce. No news has been revealed about the purchase price for the company and it must be assumed that the new owners will take advantage of the opportunity to acquire the best "fillets" of the company for the least investment. They are primarily interested in highly lucrative financial transactions.

It is also possible that Langley is speculating on short-term profits through a quick resale of the sheet-fed division to a potential Chinese investor, Shanghai Electric, which is primarily interested in gaining patents and know-how. Insolvency administrator Werner Schneider had repeatedly stated that there were serious prospects for the company in China—only the lack of time had prevented a deal.