Germany: SEP election campaign wins support of Berlin Mercedes workers

Clara Weiss
10 June 2013

Election canvassers from the German Social Equality Party (SEP) recently collected support signatures from employees at the Mercedes-Benz auto plant in Marienfelde, Berlin.

The Marienfelde plant was established in 1902 and is therefore, according to the company, the oldest Mercedes factory in Germany. Approximately 2,700 workers are employed there in the production of auto engines.

Like GM-Opel, Ford, Renault and other auto companies, Daimler is implementing comprehensive cuts in response to the global economic crisis. Late last year, supervisory board chairman Dieter Zetsche announced his aim to save at least €1 billion (US$1.3 billion) per year. The Mercedes factory in Ludwigsfelde south of Berlin plans to dismantle 200 of its 2,000 jobs by the end of the year. A closure of the entire plant is also possible.

To depress wages, Mercedes is mainly depending on the extended use of temporary and contracted workers. In mid-May, an undercover report from the ARD television station revealed that Mercedes illegally contracts innumerable workers, who get only about a third of the wages of the tenured staff.

According to the ARD report, there is a “three-tier society at Mercedes”: the permanent staff in the production sector earn an average of €3,400 (US$4,490) gross monthly, temporary workers receive only €2,600 (US$3,420), and work contract employees a mere €1,200 (US$1,580). Despite their full-time employment, many workers are therefore forced to supplement their wages by applying for Hartz IV benefits or taking a second job.

The ARD report also exposed the behaviour of the works council representatives. Although they were aware of the company’s practise, they went through the workshops every day, without saying anything, let alone mobilising workers against the abuses. The works council chairman at Mercedes even claimed on camera that he knew nothing about starvation wages paid at the plant, although he could not rule it out.

The trade unions not only support the use of temporary work; they are directly involved in the contracting out of such working conditions. The German Federation of Trade Unions (DGB) has for years operated a private employment agency in conjunction with the Weitblick-Personalpartner company. Operating through the DAA Foundation for Vocations and Training, the Verdi service industries union is involved in the DAA Temporary Employment agency, which places more than 80,000 workers. The foundation is directed by the former deputy national chairman of Verdi, Gerd Herzberg. The IG Metall union itself contracts temporary workers through its logistics division.

The use of temporary and contract work has become one of the main procedures for implementing wage and benefit cuts. The auto industry adopts this method to enforce pay cuts that reduce the level of wages in Germany to the starvation wages in eastern Europe and the US.

The American United Auto Workers (UAW) union has set the international standards on which the auto industry in western Europe is now based. Car workers in the US have suffered pay cuts of up to 50 percent in recent years. Newly employed workers earn only half the normal wage because of the “two-tier wage system” (See “UAW sets benchmark for wage-cutting in global auto industry”). The introduction of temporary and contract work is aimed at reducing wages in Germany to a similar level and dividing workers, as is happening in the US under the “two-tier wage system”.

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Mercedes is also hiring temporary workers on a wide scale in Marienfelde. Workers reported this to SEP election campaigners, who distributed the party's "Auto Workers Newsletter" at the factory gates and discussed the SEP's election program and a socialist response to the crisis of the international auto industry.

Daniel, 24 years old, works at Mercedes-Benz for a temporary employment agency and earns €7.50 an hour. He said: "The Mercedes workers get €22 to €28 per hour for the same work that I do. I'd estimate that certainly more than 50 percent of the people here are on temporary work contracts. Most of the workforce is older than me, and they have families. Of course, you can't do much with €900 a month. And that's no perspective for the younger ones in the long run, either. There are some of them who are taken on full-time, but they always get less than the old core workforce—just €10 or €11 an hour. I'm also scared that jobs are going to be cut again soon. It's rumoured that some of us are soon going to be sacked. "

Benjamin, a young worker who is also engaged by a temp agency, said: "The company is imploding. All the workmates I speak to are extremely dissatisfied. The wages are not right. We have to work three shifts and it's just not worth it."

A Turkish worker added: "We demand equal pay for equal work. It's as simple as that. How can a person live on €900 a month? Maybe my generation can, but what's going to happen to our children?"

There was also talk about the role of unions in the enforcement of wage cuts and plant closures. One worker commented: "The work councils members have always claimed to represent the interests of the workers, but now they've become best of pals with the company management. It's no different with the trade unions. Suddenly their reps are on the supervisory board with the bosses, and the next year there are no more strikes".

Stefan, who is contracted via a third-party firm to work at Mercedes, earns €8.50 per hour and can only feed his family by taking on a second job. He also has no illusions about the unions: "They've all got greased palms. And the politicians are useless because all of them are in on it, too. I reckon nothing's going to change if we take the same old course. We can't go on with the way things are".

The SEP election canvassers also made contact with many other workers—female cleaning staff and Mercedes suppliers workers—who are also engaged by temporary employment agencies to work for Mercedes. They were all extremely angry about the low wages and poor working conditions. Many of the fully employed Mercedes workers also spoke out against the use of temporary work.

Alexander from Kyrgyzstan, a contracted agency worker at a Mercedes supplier in Hanover, stressed that the crisis in the auto industry was only part of the international economic crisis. "Actually, for a long time, I haven't been interested in politics, and first I'd like to take a look at exactly what you write. It was not all bad in the Soviet Union, but the restoration [of capitalism] in the 1990s was a disaster. I think it would be good if you could introduce parts of the old system here today. But I don't think there'll be major changes without a revolution like in 1917".

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