

Germany: Two Romanian shipyard workers burned to death in overcrowded accommodation

Elizabeth Zimmermann
2 August 2013

Two Romanian workers working at the Meyer-Werft shipyard in Papenburg, Emsland, were burnt to death in their housing quarters on July 13. The two men employed on a temporary contract basis were sharing a small house with 30 other workers from Romania and Bulgaria. The tragic death of these workers throws a spotlight on the brutal conditions facing temporary and contract workers in the German shipbuilding industry.

The Meyer-Werft shipyard in Papenburg builds cruisers and luxury cruise ships for the Aida shipping line and others. In advertising materials, these ships are presented as the ideal choice for a dream vacation. The working and living conditions of many shipyard workers, however, especially those employed on limited contracts, are in fact nightmarish.

The house containing the Romanian and Bulgarian workers burned down on Saturday afternoon, as a driver for the Meyer-Werft arrived to pick up the group for their shift. The fire spread rapidly and the two Romanians, 32 and 45 years old, failed to escape the flames in the confined space. The exact cause of the fire remains unknown.

A doctor, Eissing Volker, who was called to the accident site told the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that “intolerable conditions” prevailed in the house. Up to 13 beds were jammed together in the living room. There were no closets, so the workers had to stow their belongings under their beds. “The men were herded together in a confined space.”

Workers numbering 120 from eastern Europe, mainly Romania and Bulgaria, are currently employed on a temporary contract basis working as welders and shipwrights at the Meyer-Werft shipyard. The contracts were struck with the staff service company SDS. For its

services, SDS receives a gross salary of between €20 and €35 per hour. The workers are then given their share of between €8 and €10 net.

Although this already represents an extremely low wage for very arduous work, the workers in fact receive much less. SDS had awarded its contract to another subcontractor, in this case Bordo Mavi, a company with its headquarters in Constanta on the Black Sea.

Florin Grigore, a Romanian worker killed in the fire, was employed by Bordo Mavi. His brother, Gelu Grigore, who came from Romania to Papenburg to uncover the cause of death of his 32-year-old brother, told reporters that Florin had received a wage of just €3.50 per hour for his work as a welder at the shipyard. This was revealed in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in its detailed report of July 23.

The assets of the Meyer family, who own the Meyer shipyard, are estimated at €500 million. The profits made in the production of cruise ships come at the expense of the workforce and in particular contract workers.

The Meyer-Werft shipyard employs 3,100 salaried staff. It also employs 290 short-term and 1,500 contract workers. Another 15,000 jobs in the region of East Frisia and Emsland, which suffers from high unemployment, depend on the shipyard.

Most of the contract workers come from eastern Europe, with about 700 Romanians and Bulgarians employed in Papenburg. In common with Florin Grigore, they are not employed directly by the shipyard, but rather by a complex network of subcontractors. The shipyard has more than 1,000 so-called partner companies. The SDS company currently has 120 workers from eastern Europe under contract

and had a turnover of €400 million in its business with the Meyer-Werft shipyard last year.

A statement by Gelu Grigore that his brother was working 10 to 12 hours a day, six days a week, for an hourly wage of €3.50 has been confirmed by the doctor, Volker Eissing. Workers from eastern Europe often come to his practice. Many have no passport in their possession because it has been confiscated by their boss. Some have no health insurance and “Many do not earn more than €3 an hour.”

According to Gelu Grigore, his brother received just €35 a day for a ten-to twelve-hour shift at the shipyard. This miserly sum is still more than the €170 that is the average monthly wage in Romania.

The death of the Romanian workers has thrown some light onto the brutal working and living conditions for contract workers. The massive expansion of temporary, contract and low-wage jobs in Germany is a direct result of the labour market reforms introduced by the Social Democratic-Green government led by Gerhard Schröder (1998-2005).

In the case of Meyer-Werft, these reforms have led to a multi-tiered workforce. There are permanent workers, recognisable by their yellow helmets; temporary workers, with red, green or blue helmets, who mostly receive a quarter less pay and can be dismissed at any time; and contract workers, who earn much less and have no rights at all.

The trade unions and company works councils have refused to do anything on behalf of the contract employees. The unions work closely with the management of the company and are quite prepared to tolerate these unequal working conditions.

Under these conditions, there has been a continuous reduction in the number of full-time salaried workers in the shipyards. According to a study produced by the IG Metall trade union, in 2012 more than a third of all jobs in the shipyards were carried out by contract workers (24.4 percent) or temporary workers (12.3 percent). This development has not prevented IG Metall from consolidating its relationship with management.

The death of the two Romanian workers has sparked outrage in Papenburg. In an effort to limit the damage to its image, Meyer-Werft has declared that it intends to negotiate a social charter with IG Metall ensuring enhanced working standards for contract workers.

This proposal accepts from the outset the basic

framework of the work contracts. Any agreement reached on such a charter will do little to change the harsh conditions for contract workers apart from providing more lucrative posts for the union bureaucrats. Alongside the company, contractors and subcontractor representatives from the union and company works councils will continue to oversee the intensifying exploitation of contract workers.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact