

Works council elections at Germany's ThyssenKrupp: What way forward?

Dietmar Henning
28 May 2015

The election of the new works council at ThyssenKrupp's Duisburg steel factory began yesterday and runs until 6 June. It is the outcome of a successful appeal of last year's works council election.

The opposition list "Interest Group for a 35-hour work week" demonstrated that company representatives, in close collaboration with works councilors from the IG Metall trade union, engaged in massive intimidation to influence the election. Four members of the list, including the leader Fred Wans, successfully challenged the works council election at the labour court in Duisburg. In mid-March, the state labour court in Düsseldorf confirmed the ruling, paving the way for new elections.

The list, led by Wans, was founded last year and is in opposition to the IG Metall-dominated works council, which has imposed several rounds of wage cuts and continuous layoffs on the workforce, in cooperation with the trade union. The opposition list has won support as many of the 13,000 workers are increasingly outraged and frustrated with the machinations of the IG Metall works council and the trade union.

To this extent, the founding of an opposition list against the mafia-like structures of IG Metall in the plant is an expression of the beginning of a rebellion by workers against IG Metall's works council representatives and the trade union. IG Metall, in cooperation with the company, has done everything to try to suppress the opposition.

The opposition list was successful in combatting IG Metall's intimidation, but now the question is posed: what way forward in the struggle against the corrupt machinations of IG Metall?

It is necessary to take a decisive step forward and recognise the reality that the problems of ThyssenKrupp's workforce cannot be resolved in Duisburg with a perspective confined within the limits of trade unionism. Workers in every other plant, not only in the steel sector, but in all other industries and public administrations, not merely in Germany but all over the world, confront the same challenges.

In the face of the scale of these problems, it is an illusion for workers to believe that a less corrupt and more militant trade union can represent their interests. Any genuine initiative to launch a principled defence of worker's rights requires a political perspective based on two principles. First, it must be directed internationally towards establishing a global alliance among workers, and secondly, it must oppose the capitalist system and the drive for profits and take up the fight for the socialist reorganization of society.

Thus far, the leadership of the opposition list has avoided discussing these fundamental political issues. Instead, the opposition led by Wans has sought to form alliances based on the lowest common denominator of trade unionist politics. In the current works council election, it has joined together with a second opposition list. This organisation, which has existed for years, calls itself "Workforce List" and is led by works councilor Binali Demir, who is also a city councilor for the Left Party in Duisburg.

Also standing in Wans and Demir's joint list is Yasar Firat, cofounder of the "Workforce List." Firat was a member of the Left Party at the time of the Workforce Lists founding, although he subsequently left. He justified his departure with the explanation that it wasn't possible to do anything for workers interests in the party. In the past, Firat stood on the IG Metall list and was elected to the works council.

After Wans' list emerged in opposition to IG Metall, Firat joined. At an employees' meeting he accused the presiding IG Metall majority of corruption in the selection of candidates for the union list. He is currently involved in a legal dispute over this with IG Metall, with the first hearing due on 1 June.

The cooperation between Wans, Demir and Firat has been justified with the claim that the opposition must be united. To achieve this, they argue that it is necessary to exclude politics.

The first step is to campaign for workers' interests in the plant against IG Metall, it is argued. Thus the joint list of Wans, Demir and Firat has confined itself to promising

workers to overturn the contracts agreed to by the works council containing the greatest attacks on wages and working conditions.

The concentration on minimal trade union demands cannot resolve the fundamental problems confronting the workforce and has an inevitable logic. It will lead to the subordination of workers to industrial and economic constraints, transforming the works council opposition of today into tomorrow's corrupt social partners.

Rumours have recently been circulating that ThyssenKrupp could be preparing to sell off its entire steel subsidiary, following the increase by Swedish investment firm Cevian Capital of its stake in ThyssenKrupp to 15 percent last year. The consequence would be mass layoffs and a further deterioration of working conditions, if not the destruction of the steel subsidiary.

What will happen if the steel market collapses due to the sustained global economic crisis, and company management or an investor like Cevian demands the elimination of steel production in Duisburg?

Would the opposition in the works council then call for wage cuts and lay-offs so as to prevent the shutdown of the plant? Would it assist in the destruction of the plant in conformity with social partnership?

Or would it make the campaign for the unconditional defence of jobs the prelude to a broader mobilisation of the entire working class to overthrow the government, to prepare the way for the transformation of the major industrial concerns and financial institutions into nationalised property? In the face of the global capitalist crisis, this is the only realistic way to bring an end to the downward spiral of social conditions. Such questions must be thoroughly thought out and discussed by workers.

It must be understood that the reason for the transformation of the trade unions and their works councils into tools of management and government is not simply the widespread corruption of their officials and works councilors. The degeneration of the trade unions is an international phenomenon and has deep objective roots in the changes in world economy. The globalisation of production has undermined the framework of all nationally-based social and labour market policies.

While the trade unions in the past could apply pressure on companies and achieve at least partial improvements for the workers, today it is the exact opposite. The trade unions and works councils blackmail the workers so as to implement cuts to wages, benefits and working conditions to secure a competitive advantage for the corporations.

At the same time, their interests correspond ever more with those of the state. The German government has responded to the crisis of capitalism and the European Union (EU) with

the revival of German militarism. Since German President Joachim Gauck announced the end of military restraint at the beginning of last year, a major military build-up has been under way.

To obtain the billions required for the military, the government is planning major social attacks. Massive social and political class struggles are inevitable. To combat the opposition to layoffs, social cuts, and military interventions by the German army, basic democratic rights like the right to strike are being eliminated. This is the significance and goal of the contract unity law which the grand coalition adopted in the Bundestag last Friday.

The struggle against job cuts and the deterioration of working conditions is directly connected with the struggle against militarism and the preparations for war. This requires an internationalist and socialist programme. The clarification of these political issues is urgently necessary if an oppositional movement in the factories capable of fighting for the interests of the working class is to be built.

Whoever seeks to avoid this political conflict has already taken the first step towards adapting to company management, the system of social partnership, corruption, and the betrayal of workers' interests.

ThyssenKrupp workers should draw the lessons from the shutdown of Opel's Bochum plant. In Germany, there was hardly any other workforce which rebelled more often against the collaboration of the company, works council and IG Metall. But time and again, the internal factory opposition led by the DKP (German Communist Party), Left Party and other pseudo-left groups came to the aid of IG Metall and its social democratic works councilors.

Elevated into the works council by the workforce, these forces continued where IG Metall's social democratic works councilors had left off. In the end, works council chairman Rainer Einenkel, a Left Party member, imposed the shutdown of the plant. He was assisted in this by leading officials in his party, including Sevim Dagdelen, Gregor Gysi, and Sahra Wagenknecht.

The entire ThyssenKrupp workforce and ultimately all workers confront political tasks. The only way to fight for workers' interests in the factories is to turn to an internationalist and socialist perspective. This is the perspective fought for by the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (PSG). Click here to contact the PSG to discuss this perspective.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact