

European Steel unions demand trade war in Brussels

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The Belgian capital of Brussels witnessed a disgusting spectacle last Monday. The European steel trade unions, above all Germany's IG Metall, mobilised their foot soldiers and joined with major European industrial companies to demand sharper trade war measures against China and Russia.

Close to 5,000 demonstrators from 17 countries, mainly Germany, were transported to the headquarters of the European Union (EU) Commission in the Belgian capital. Joining hands with AEGIS Europe, an association representing 30 industrial associations across the continent, the trade union functionaries called for a halt to the importing of cheap steel from China. "Stop the China dumping", was emblazoned on one trade union banner.

One hundred years after the "Burgfrieden", a pact concluded with employers' organisations at the onset of the First World War in which the German unions abandoned the right to strike and conduct social struggles so as to support the Kaiser's war policy, and 83 years after the subordination of the German trade union leadership to the Nazi regime, Germany's trade unions are again drawing on this reactionary tradition.

Together with the European steel industry, the trade unions are accusing China of sending large quantities of state-subsidised steel to Europe. They are demanding steep fines and other measures to prevent this.

In addition, the trade unions and concerns called at their joint Brussels rally for the withdrawal of planned restrictions of emissions trading, because they would weaken the competitiveness of European companies, and not to extend market economy status (MES) to China, because it would be more difficult to impose trade war measures like customs duties.

After the demonstration, European industrial leaders handed EU Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker

a "European industrial manifesto for free and fair trade". It states, "We, the workers, trade unions and employers of European industry, call upon the European Parliament, member states and the Commission to say yes to jobs and fair trade and no to market economy status for China!"

The Brussels demonstration was the high point to date of the campaign by the trade unions and industrial concerns in support of stricter trade war measures against their competitors in China and Russia. A leading role in the campaign is being played by IG Metall. The union sent 1,500 workers alone from German steel plants, including nearly 600 from Duisburg—350 apprentices from Thyssen-Krupp, 150 from Hüttenwerke Krupp-Mannesmann and almost 90 workers from ArcelorMittal.

IG Metall organised demonstrations at German steel plants in January, where it protested against the planned changes to emissions trading and "cheap steel" from China and Russia. IG Metall and the steel association agreed last month to a joint statement on the emissions trading system and some corresponding demands.

The steel concerns currently confront overproduction on the world market, resulting in a sustained drop in steel prices. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the world economy survived to a considerable extent on trade with the Chinese state. But its double-digit growth rates are now a thing of the past. In January, exports declined by around 11 percent in comparison to a year earlier, and imports declined by almost 19 percent.

In a statement released by the foreign trade ministry, China described the overproduction in the steel market as a "joint challenge for the whole world." It had already "introduced measures to eliminate overcapacity," the statement from Beijing declared.

Cuts of up to 150 million tons in production over the

coming five years are planned. This could cost 400,000 jobs in the steel industry alone (without including companies indirectly impacted), state news agency Xinhua reported. Nonetheless, European industrial representatives were dissatisfied that the planned cuts were far below China's overcapacity of 300 million tons.

In other words, the European corporations are demanding close to 1 million job cuts in China in order to retain their profits. The EU Commission is to serve as an instrument in this trade war.

The fact that IG Metall and its allies are supporting this campaign proves the reactionary character of their nationalist politics of defending existing production locations. They divide steelworkers, making it easier for the concerns to impose their attacks in Germany and Europe, as well as in China.

In the last six months alone, around 7,000 jobs have been eliminated in European steel plants. Since 2008, 85,000 steel industry jobs have been wiped out across the EU. The next round is now taking place. Mass job cuts are on the order of the day.

The coalition between the trade unions and steel companies is aimed precisely at preparing and imposing such cuts. The trade unions will implement the layoffs themselves. They already have positions on the boards of companies with their labour directors—as human resources chiefs are called in the steel industry.

On Monday, Dr. Nicola Hersch, labour director at ArcelorMittal in Duisburg and previously head of economic, labour market and media policy at the German Confederation of Trade Unions in North Rhine-Westphalia, was not the only top bureaucrat marching. Also present was the labour director at HKM Peter Gasse. Gasse, a Social Democrat who led the IG Metall NRW region until 2004, expressed the hope that EU parliamentary deputies would “think again about China's dumping prices.”

Gasse was accompanied by HKM central works council chair Ulrich Kimpel. As in the past, the works councils at the steel plants will take on the task of enforcing the assault on jobs against the opposition of the workforce.

In line with previous campaigns, IG Metall's national campaign is directly bound up with the growing war preparations against Russia and China.

Ever since leading representatives of the German

government announced the end of German military restraint two years ago at the Munich Security Conference, the German government has significantly expanded its global interventions in pursuit of its economic and geostrategic interests. In Syrian airspace, Tornado planes from the German air force and Russian jets are flying dangerously close. Even an oversight or misunderstanding could provoke a third world war, according to the estimations of all participants.

Under these conditions, the European steel trade unions—led above all by IG Metall, the world's largest single-industry trade union—are giving their full backing to the European industrial concerns' campaign. The trade unions, just like their corporate colleagues, fear the urgently needed unity of European workers with their colleagues in Russia and China against poverty, job cuts and war. This is why they are mobilising support for their national corporations and governments in trade war and military conflict with Russia and China.

It is high time that workers liberate themselves organisationally and programmatically from these reactionary organisations and send them where they belong: the dustbin of history. We call on all steelworkers to prepare for the inevitable confrontation with the corporations, IG Metall and the works councils by making contact with the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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