

# Steel day of action: IG Metall, employers and German government demand trade war

**Our correspondents**  
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Monday's day of action held under the motto "Steel is the future" was a reactionary and shameful display. While many steel workers are alarmed about the future of their jobs, the German metalworkers union IG Metall organised the rallies as a backdrop against which management and government representatives could demand protective tariffs and trade war measures against China.

Around 45,000 steelworkers took part in rallies held in Duisburg, Berlin, Saarbrücken and several other cities. Among the speakers were high-ranking trade union officials and employee representatives as well as government officials and steel bosses.

The aim of these events was not to defend jobs, though this was mentioned repeatedly. Rather, they were aimed at promoting German economic interests and safeguarding company profits. To a man, the speakers demanded sanctions against China and the withdrawal of planned environmental protection regulations.

At the same time, workers were told to expect further job cuts, in keeping with a "necessary" consolidation of the steel industry. IG Metall officials were noticeably eager to link the growing conflict within domestic steel companies, which are preparing massive job cuts, to a combined struggle of workers and businesses against China.

## **Duisburg**

The largest rally took place in Duisburg. The unions claimed a total of 16,000 workers gathered in front of Gate 1 of the ThyssenKrupp steelworks in the north of the city.

A video shown on the rally stage set the nationalist tone for the day of action. According to the union video, if the amount of Chinese steel imported to Germany had instead been manufactured in Germany, it would have resulted not in 14 million tons of CO2 emissions, but "only" 9.8 million tons (35 billion tons of CO2 are emitted annually).

Keynote speakers were IG Metall chairman Jörg

Hofmann and German finance minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD).

Hofmann declared: "If China claims to be a market economy, then it must abide by market laws."

"State subsidised steel dumping," he added, cannot be a part of it. "We don't want protectionism," he maintained, "only fair competition."

"We have seen a lot of restructuring in the steel industry, and that will continue," he announced. "But that is only possible together with the workforce," he shouted.

Hofmann is talking about the trade unions. They are offering their services to push through the coming attacks against the workforce—in Duisburg, IG Metall, the steel companies and politicians constantly spoke of "necessary consolidation." According to Hofmann, they want to "sit down at a table in Berlin and Brussels" with the steel companies.

As Günter Back, chairman of the employee representative council at ThyssenKrupp, declared: "In the consolidation of the steel industry, let's not sit at the children's table."

Hofmann shouted, "2016 is the fateful year for steel." Several other speakers before and after him employed this formulation.

Hofmann called on the government to involve itself in the "sustainability" of the steel industry. "It is therefore good that our IG Metall colleague and Vice-Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel is here today," he declared.

Finance Minister Gabriel began by relating his personal experience. He came from Salzgitter and had represented IG Metall for a long time on the supervisory board of the Salzgitter AG steel company. "At that time [1998] we worked to prevent the sale of Salzgitter AG and temporarily place it under state control in order to secure jobs," said Gabriel.

The state of Lower Saxony holds 26.5 percent of the shares of Germany's second largest steel company.

However, that does not mean jobs are better protected. Salzgitter AG also cut positions.

Gabriel also spoke out against Chinese steel imports: “The EU must finally take measures against steel that enters the market below the cost of production.” The SPD chairman reported that members of the government are warning of a trade war with China. He was confident this could be avoided. One could achieve nothing “if one draws in one’s horns.” He added, “The Chinese understand plain language.”

He pledged to “dear Jörg” (IG Metall boss Hofmann) that he would not agree to any regulation that did not take the protection of jobs exactly as seriously as it did the protection of the climate, neither in Europe nor in the German government. If a consolidation was necessary, “then it must not be allowed to take place only in Germany.”

Heiko Reese, leader of the IG Metall steel office in Düsseldorf, had previously stressed that the union would fight for the steel industry together with the employers. “I’m delighted to welcome Mr. Hans Jürgen Kerkhoff, the president of the German Steel Federation,” said Reese.

The industrialist declared the steel industry was systemically important for Germany. Great Britain had shown where a concentration on banking and service providers leads. Unlike in Britain, said Kerkhoff, one must fight against the de-industrialisation of Germany. “We’re fighting for the competitive strength of Germany. For that we need the federal and state governments.”

When Hannelore Kraft, the minister president of North Rhine-Westphalia, offered support, a steel worker from ThyssenKrupp declared angrily, “She said the same thing to the Opel workers in Bochum. And what happened? The factory was torn down and of the more than 5,000 workers, 500 at the most have jobs.”

Most of the workers reacted with similar scepticism and suspicion to the IG Metall functionaries, as well as the squad of local, state and federal politicians in attendance. “They’re sitting there together with the employers negotiating the next job cuts,” said two ThyssenKrupp steel workers from Dortmund before the rally began. “This is all just a show put on by IG Metall.”

## **Berlin**

At the rally in front of the Chancellery in Berlin, representatives of IG Metall and the invited steel bosses and government officials also spread anti-Chinese nationalism. Among other things, they spoke of “getting the Chinese rulers to ecological sanity” and “putting the

great power China in its place” and repeatedly urged the German trade unions, businesses and politicians “not to let themselves be divided against China.”

As soon as *World Socialist Web Site* reporters spoke with steel workers, it became clear that many rejected the nationalism of the trade unions. Two young workers from the town of Eisenhüttenstadt remarked: “Workers in China are ultimately doing the same job as us and confront the same problems.” They agreed that their allies were the workers throughout Europe and the world and not the trade union bureaucrats, steel bosses and politicians on the stage in front of them.

An older worker, also from Eisenhüttenstadt, stressed that the job cuts of the last year were carried out through the close collaboration of the unions and the companies. Of the more than 10,000 steel workers once employed, today there are only about 2,500 remaining. This developed into a longer discussion on the necessity of a socialist perspective and a united international struggle of the workers independently of the trade unions.

Members of the Partei für Soziale Gleichheit (Socialist Equality Party, PSG) distributed thousands of copies of the joint statement by the PSG and its sister party, the Socialist Equality Party (Britain). It states the following: “The nationalistic closing of ranks of the unions with the steel corporations is reactionary in every respect:

- It will not save a single job, but serves to produce further job cuts, wage reductions and benefit cuts.
- It pits European workers against Chinese workers and workers within Europe against one another, and prevents any effective opposition to international corporations.
- It sharpens international tensions and conflicts. Protectionism and trade war are a preliminary stage to military conflict.”

Yesterday’s day of action by IG Metall completely confirms this assessment and serves as a serious warning to workers.



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