

The Verdi union's despicable role in the breakup of Germany's Kaiser's Tengelmann retail group

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At a recent extraordinary meeting of the supervisory board of Kaiser's Tengelmann, the owner of the retail chain Karl-Erivan Haub, arrogantly declared that he would give the negotiating parties just two weeks before he begins the breakup of the company.

Haub is among the 30 richest Germans and has amassed a personal fortune of more than four billion euros through the extreme exploitation of the workforce in his stores. His autocratic announcement is a direct result of his close collaboration with Frank Bsirske, leader of the Verdi trade union. Haub knows he has nothing to fear from Verdi.

On September 22, Bsirske invited the owners and top managers of Kaiser's Tengelmann, and other retail chains Edeka, Rewe and Markant AG to Frankfurt for confidential discussions. In addition to Haub, Marius Mosa (Edeka) and Alain Caparros (Rewe) also came. To prevent any employees from protesting outside, Bsirske kept the venue of the meeting secret.

These clandestine negotiations are part of the union's efforts to find the best way to push through job losses and keep those affected quiet for as long as possible. Verdi has taken on the task of enforcing the winding up of Kaiser's Tengelmann against the workforce.

In North Rhine Westfalia alone, eighty branches are threatened with closure and 3,000 out of 4,000 jobs are at risk. The Birkenhof meat plants in Viersen are to be closed. Lucrative Kaiser's Tengelmann branches in Berlin and Munich will be sold off individually. The group currently has approximately 15,650 employees in its 430 stores.

After the supervisory board meeting and the announced time limit, union officials sought to present an optimistic picture. "There is no breakup," works

council member Manfred Schick claimed. Without providing any further details, he continued, "There is a hope, and there is a real chance to survive. That is important." This was the only thing that was said. All details of the arrangements and agreements have been kept secret.

Now Verdi wants to continue the roundtable talks with the bosses, and the upcoming discussions are to be kept confidential and free of protests. It must be clearly said: Verdi is organizing a veritable conspiracy against the workforce. Its officials on the Kaiser's Tengelmann supervisory board have, of course, been given all the information. They have known about the closure and redundancy plans for a long time, but knowingly keep workers in the dark.

Verdi knows the mood that exists in the workforce very well, and knows how much anger has accumulated over the years. Jobs in retail are among the worst paid, are the hardest and most stressful ever. So-called mini-jobs and temporary jobs are commonplace. Every moment of workers' time is strictly controlled. Arbitrary sackings are not uncommon.

This was shown clearly eight years ago in the "Emmely case." The Kaiser's cashier Barbara Emme, called "Emmely," was sacked in 2008 after working for the company for 31 years, for allegedly having redeemed two coupons worth 1.30 euros, which a customer had left. Emmely rejected all the accusations made against her and fought for her job for years, finally being successful in court. She died of heart failure at the age of 57 last year.

Kaiser's Tengelmann staff work hard every day, while their conditions have been deteriorating for years. Five years ago, Verdi agreed to waive 50 percent of

Christmas bonus and holiday pay, on the grounds this would secure jobs.

Growing competition in the retail sector is mercilessly passed onto the employees. According to industry experts, bricks and mortar trade could shrink by around 40 billion euros because of the growth in online shopping and shrinking purchasing power by 2020. The Kaiser's Tengelmann chain, which does not enjoy the same economies of scale as the giant retail corporations Edeka, Rewe, Lidl and Aldi, has suffered losses running into millions for years.

By selling off the chain, corporate chief Haub hopes to get rid of the loss-maker. Simultaneously, he is speculating that Edeka will integrate the Kaiser's Tengelmann branches into its Netto subsidiary, where again Haub himself is involved.

The union officials are concealing this naked profit grubbing and use their positions to keep all protests under control and to ensure smooth business operations.

Frank Bsirske's colleague, Stefanie Nutzenberger, plays a special role, responsible for Verdi's national executive for retail trade. She herself sits on the supervisory board of Rewe. In the roundtable talks, she would be able to ensure Rewe was given an opportunity to buy up thriving Kaiser's Tengelmann branches for a song.

Meanwhile, the Berlin works council chairman Volker Bohne is spreading the illusion that all the threatened jobs could be saved in a buyout. Speaking on Berlin radio station RBB, he said he still hoped for a full takeover of the group by Edeka: "The fact that the participants have said they will meet again, is a positive sign."

In reality, the originally planned sale of the entire chain to Edeka has long been moot. Initially, the Monopolies Commission spoke out against it, and the anti-trust agency exercised a veto. When Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel (Social Democratic Party, SPD) set aside the prohibition through a ministerial decree, Rewe and Markant AG complained and obtained the suspension of the decree before the Düsseldorf Higher Regional Court.

At present, Gabriel is seeking to enforce his ministerial approval before the Federal Supreme Court, although Haub no longer wants to wait for this.

Gabriel's priority is not the interests of the cashiers

and other workers, but rather strengthening the union. If the ministerial authorization is upheld, all decisions on the fate of the Kaiser's Tengelmann branches and their employees would be subject to approval by Verdi and works council representatives in the retail sector for the next five years. These have already negotiated new contracts with Edeka in recent weeks in which they had agreed to transfers, a deterioration of conditions and the closure of the Birkenhof meat plants in Viersen.

Gabriel wants to boost the unions, because he sees them as important partners of a potential SPD-Left Party-Green Party federal government following next year's general election, which would continue the policy of welfare cuts and military buildup that began 15 years ago with the SPD-Green Party government led by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder.



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