

Latest cuts plan at ThyssenKrupp Steel Europe threatens 4,000 jobs

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ThyssenKrupp Steel Europe has adopted a new program of jobs and cost cutting. An additional €500 million is to be saved over the next three years in its steel sector, which currently has around 26,000 employees (almost 22,000 in North Rhine-Westphalia). The program was announced on April 7 after a meeting of the Economic Committee of the steel group in Duisburg, at which representatives of management and the works councils held discussions.

As has been the case with all former cuts programs, the representatives of the IG Metall union and the works council have assumed the task of enforcing job cuts, the decommissioning of plants and the rundown of working conditions for those who keep their jobs.

The union representatives and works councils have complained that the ThyssenKrupp board of directors and Andreas Goss, the head of the steel section, have failed to sufficiently inform them of the extent of the cuts and the future for the steel sector. Workers doubt this version of events under conditions where the union reps sit with management on numerous committees. What is clear is that the workforce receives barely any information about what has been decided.

On April 7, Günter Back, the chairman of the joint works council of ThyssenKrupp Steel Europe, told the press that the plants for the processing of heavy plate in Duisburg-Hüttenheim and Bochum are threatened with imminent closure. It is estimated that between 300 and 400 jobs will be affected, but this is probably only the start, Back stated.

Just two days later IG Metall, after meeting with the works councils, announced a more realistic scenario. On April 11, Dieter Lieske, the representative of IG Metall Duisburg-Dinslaken, told Reuters: "It's about 4,050 jobs. That is the most likely outcome." According to management documentation, about 15 percent of the approximately 27,000 jobs at ThyssenKrupp Steel Europe

are to be eliminated.

The workers in Duisburg-Hüttenheim are not only concerned about the 350 jobs directly threatened, they fear for the survival of the factory, which currently has more than 1,000 employees. The situation is similar at the ThyssenKrupp steel works in Bochum and Dortmund and other sections threatened by job cuts and closure.

ThyssenKrupp itself has not released information on the number of jobs affected by the savings measures. The company said the savings should be achieved over the next three years via cost reductions in personnel, maintenance and repair, logistics, distribution and administration.

IG Metall confirmed to Reuters that it would support the planned restructuring. Before doing so, however, it would have to be clear whether Thyssen-Krupp planned to merge its steel division with Tata Steel. "We strongly reject such a merger," Lieske told Reuters.

Both ThyssenKrupp works council chairman, Wilhelm Segerath, and the works council chair for the steel section, Günter Back, have repeatedly stated that they would only seriously discuss the new restructuring measures in the steel sector when management made clear that no deal with Tata Steel was planned.

In January of this year, Segerath said, "We will not accept that our locations are threatened in the event of a consolidation." He attacked Tata in particular for offering a five-year pledge of continued operations to the unions at the British steelworks in Port Talbot, in exchange for shutting down the existing pension fund. Segerath said: "If they get five years, we want at least 10 years."

This nationalist double game makes clear that the union and works councils have no principled opposition to a merger, as long as workers in Britain pay the price with their jobs.

Heinrich Hiesinger, the CEO of ThyssenKrupp, declared that the new savings program was necessary,

regardless of whether or not a merger with the European steel sector of the Indian Tata Group took place.

The works council and trade union officials will decide in the coming weeks and months on how best to implement the restructuring and the reduction of thousands of jobs. Their tactic is already well known. First of all they feign indignation, then a few harmless protests are organized, prior to the union bosses giving their signature to the closure of entire factories and the loss of thousands of jobs.

The works council of ThyssenKrupp's heavy plate factory in Duisburg-Hüttenheim made an initial start with this process with meetings held at the beginning of shifts and during shifts. The works council chairman of the factory, Werner von Häfen, warned of "significant restrictions" in production and threatened "further industrial action."

On May 3, one day before ThyssenKrupp Steel's next supervisory board meeting, the IG Metall and works council plan to hold a demonstration in Duisburg. One day before, management will inform the works councils of the executive's plans.

According to a report in *Wirtschaftswoche* the "Taskforce" will meet at this point. The Taskforce is a body consisting of management and works councils, which convened after the last IG Metall action day in front of the ThyssenKrupp Steel headquarters in Duisburg on August 31 last year. Since then nothing more has been heard from this taskforce. During last year's IG Metall and company day of action, demands were raised for measures to be taken against Chinese "dumping steel."

The IG Metall and works councils are particularly prominent in the campaign against Chinese steel imports. Once again they try to split workers along nationalist lines. Although it is clear that protectionism and economic nationalism are the precursors to military interventions and open war, the union demands higher import tariffs and punitive duties against steel from China.

Segerath praised the US government last year because it was quicker to impose higher import duties against Chinese steel than the EU Commission. Since then the German steel group Salzgitter has been hit by US import duties. Since the end of March it has had to pay a tariff of 22.9 percent on heavy plate and other export products.

The nationalist policy of the trade unions is supported by the Left Party. On March 24 it organised a "steel conference" in Duisburg, involving the participation of 35 "interested" parties from pseudo-left organisations. Among them was the managing director of IG Metall in

Kaiserslautern, Alexander Ulrich, who sits in the Bundestag as a deputy for the Left Party.

According to a report from the conference, Ulrich "was committed to carrying out joint action with the employer, as was the case last year at the steel day of action." The former Social Democrat and Opel works council member pointed "to the competition coming from cheap steel from China" and "defended the protective customs policy of the EU against China resulting from the successful actions of steel workers."

Similar remarks were made by the Duisburg City Councillor Mirze Edis, who is also deputy chair of the works council at Hüttenwerke Krupp-Mannesmann in Duisburg.

Not a single job is safe on the basis of such a nationalist policy. The allies of steelworkers in Germany are steelworkers in China, the UK and the rest of the world—not their respective managements. The price for the policy of class collaboration is paid by workers, in the form of job losses and constantly worsening working conditions.

The tragic consequences of this policy were demonstrated by the two deadly accidents at steelworks this month. On April 4, a 44-year-old locomotive driver in the Oxygen steel mill 1 of ThyssenKrupp Steel in Bruckhausen was trapped between two trains and died on the spot. A week later a 30-year-old worker died during repair work at the Deutsche Edelstahlwerke in Witten. The electrician was crushed by a stamping machine and died soon after in hospital.

In such cases, little information is released about the background of the incidents. But it is obvious that increased work pressure and insufficient staff working in difficult and hazardous jobs play a major role in such horrific accidents.



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