

Bombardier Hennigsdorf workers express anger at the IG Metall union

Gustav Kemper and Verena Nees
7 July 2017

Earlier this week WSWS reporters spoke with workers in Hennigsdorf, near Berlin, about the decision of the rail and locomotive manufacturer Bombardier Transportation to close down production in the town. Many expressed their disappointment and frustration about the actions of the IG Metall union, which sits on the company Supervisory Board and had approved the 2,200 layoffs, a quarter of the Bombardier workforce in Germany.

The Hennigsdorf factory, which looks back on more than a hundred years of locomotive building and employed 9,000 workers in the former East Germany, will see an end to the large-scale production of trains by the end of 2019. According to the Supervisory Board decision, a so-called Centre for Development, Controlling and Service will remain. Of today's 2,300 employees, up to 500 will lose their job. A so-called "social plan" is to be prepared by September.

By underwriting the decision of the Supervisory Board, the IG Metall has helped deliver a coup de grace to the workforce. In an interview with the *Tagesspiegel* July 1, Bombardier's boss in Germany Michael Fohrer boasted of the close collaboration with IG Metall. "What is important is that we have succeeded in developing a common approach without turmoil--with the management, the union and the workers. That is not self-evident."

According to Fohrer, the company wants to achieve a profit margin of eight percent by the year 2020. "The first step is to break even, then it's about profit optimization." The IG Metall supports these goals. While the union was calling for protests, where it made hollow promises about defending jobs, behind the backs of the workers it was holding secret talks about implementing the company's plans to downsize.

The fence outside Bombardier in Hennigsdorf still bears the IG Metall banner with the slogan, "We cannot be shunted out!" Now, this merely provokes bitterness among the workers. "I've been at this factory for 43 years.

I'm hopping mad, I've run out of ideas about it," one worker on the early shift angrily called out as he rode by on his bicycle. "I've resigned from the IG Metall," the next one to pass remarked. Another said, "Politicians, companies, trade unions, they all just grease each other's palms."

A worker from the final assembly team in Hall 74 stopped to talk. "We were just kept dangling by management and the IG Metall," she said. "The mood in the company is very depressed." Most of her colleagues are between age 40 and 50 and are in the middle of their working lives. She does not see the "exclusion of compulsory redundancies" up to the end of 2019 as a success. All this means is that you have to find a new job or be retrained by the end of 2019, she said. But there are no new jobs in Hennigsdorf.

A worker from Berlin surmised that the restructuring concept had been long-agreed, even while the IG Metall was organizing protests. For example, the Hennigsdorf management had not made a serious bid for a large-scale S-Bahn Berlin (urban transit) contract so its competitor Stadler finally got it.

Markus, a young worker at Bombardier PPC, said, "My opinion about the IG Metall is not at all positive." Last November, they had all been called on to join the IG Metall: "Join, everyone," they said. "The IG Metall supports us. If it comes to strike, it does everything for us." Markus too became a member, but now wants to leave.

In his opinion, the IG Metall was only looking after its media image. "For the individual worker or for my fifty colleagues here, they are not interested at all. They always need the big stage."

With around one hundred and fifty employees, Bombardier PPC is a "company within a company" and serves as a supplier of drive and control systems for the locomotive branch of Bombardier, as well as for other

vehicle manufacturers. Nothing has been said so far about the fate of this workforce.

Most of the workers at the factory gate doubt that the Bombardier site in Hennigsdorf will survive. "You can't keep a production site going with development and controlling," the 53-year-old Endrik points out. He has been working as a foreman in this company for 37 years and has already experienced a lot since the end of the former East Germany in 1990.

"After 1990, there was a wave of sackings every two years," he says. The same applies to the second major works in Hennigsdorf; the steel plant taken over by the Italian company Riva in 1992 is currently celebrating its centenary. Up to 1989, there were still 8,500 workers employed. Today only 670 are left.

He had resigned from the IG Metall in 1993, Endrik says. At the time of the large metal workers strike he did not agree that the trade union involved only the steelworkers, but not the locomotive workers in Hennigsdorf, thus dividing the workforce. At that time, the former East German state-owned combine LEW (Locomotive Electro-technical Works) belonged to AEG, which had been given back its former property in 1992. In 1996, the factory was taken over by Adranz, and in 2001 by the Canadian Bombardier group.

The industrial town of Hennigsdorf has a long history of militancy. Hennigsdorf workers played a big part in the November Revolution of 1918/19 and in the defeat of the Kapp Putsch in 1920. Paul Schreier, co-founder of the Spartacus League alongside Karl Liebknecht, had built up a large Communist Party group there. In 1933, he fled from the Nazis to the Soviet Union and was murdered in Stalin's purges in 1937. The Stalinist regime in East Berlin concealed this fact until 1989.

Hennigsdorf factories were also involved in the workers' revolt against the East German Stalinist regime. On 17 June 1953, more than 5,000 workers from the steelworks and locomotive factory marched to Berlin to support the construction workers against increases in output being demanded. Later, Hennigsdorf was cut off from a direct S-Bahn connection to Berlin by the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961.

Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, there were always industrial battles. In 1991, 5,000 steelmakers occupied the factory for two weeks to prevent its privatization by the Riva Group, and after that Hennigsdorf workers took action to resist the effects of capitalist restoration. The sell-out of these battles by the IG Metall is what is responsible for the decline of this proud industrial town.

An older assembly worker, who retires next year, was also negative about the 27 years that have elapsed since German unification. "I was against reunification at the time," he says. "These rats from the West, the capitalists, destroy everything." His father-in-law, he continues, was sacked in West Germany in 1952 for being a member of the Communist Party and came to East Germany, where he was also treated badly. He has been out of the IG Metall for a long time, he added.

In the discussions at the factory gate the question arises again and again as to how workers can defend their jobs in the future. In mid-June, the foundation stone for a new assembly hall was laid in Bautzen, in Saxony. At that time, the chairman of the Hennigsdorf works council, Michael Wobst, who is also deputy chair of Bombardier Transportation's Supervisory Board, and who supported the most recent company decisions, sought to whip up sentiments against the workforce in Bautzen.

Many workers rejected this attempt to play off each location against the other, and agreed with the perspective of the World Socialist Web Site and SGP (Socialist Equality Party) that workers must act together internationally against the global corporation.

Sabine K., who has been at the company for 40 years, and had worked there in accounting, witnessed the relocation of the accounting function to Romania. She was transferred to the Controlling department, but some of her colleagues lost their jobs. At that time, she had thought that nothing could ever be changed. "But today, I think it's time for us to get out of our comfort zone and fight together," she adds.

A Berlin worker complained that the company is always looking for the lowest cost means of production. "It's just a matter of finding the cheapest version, counting everything down so that profits go up as fast as possible. They don't see the entire product, a locomotive as a whole." The production of quality trains is thus made impossible.

A lively discussion then developed about the destructive character of global capitalism, which subordinates production to profit and which today is heading toward trade wars and world war. The fitter nodded, saying he had followed this development.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact