

German trade union, works council and Bombardier management unite to impose plant shutdown in stages

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Employees at Bombardier's longstanding rail carriage manufacturing facility in Hennigsdorf were confronted with a united front of company management, works council, IG Metall trade union officials, and Social Democrats (SPD) last Friday. At an employees' meeting, they all declared in virtually the same terms why they support the June 29 decision by the company's supervisory board, which will mean the elimination of almost one in four jobs at Bombardier.

For an hour and a half, close to 1,000 Bombardier workers, who had gathered in the town's sports hall, were bombarded with buzzwords such as "efficiency," "profitability," "competence centre" and "industry 4.0."

For more than a year, the IG Metall union and works council had been promising at protest rallies to lead a struggle to defend jobs. At the entrance to the sports hall, IG Metall once again hung its banner with the slogan, "We will not allow ourselves to be discarded."

Instead, they have abandoned any pretense of struggle. The employees' meeting was aimed at preparing the workers for the shutdown, in stages, of the venerable rail carriage manufacturing plant in Hennigsdorf, where some 2,300 workers are still employed. The supervisory board's decision will hit the facilities in Hennigsdorf and Görlitz particularly severely. In Hennigsdorf, only a so-called global competency centre for the development of trains will remain, with jobs for "highly-qualified" workers, as company management put it.

Michael Wobst, the works council chairman and deputy chairman of the supervisory board, sought in a power point presentation to sugarcoat the elimination of 400 of 2,300 jobs in Hennigsdorf by the end of 2019 and the virtual shutdown of train carriage production. The supervisory board decision was not the result of negotiations, he said, but a benchmark paper. Now the

intention was to begin tough "negotiations over detail."

This is the same old, although this time barely concealed, game: Wobst identified the elimination of 316 jobs in Hennigsdorf, a further 44 at internal supplier Bombardier PPC, as well as other support jobs affected, and a further 747 jobs in Görlitz. He did not mention the layoff of 700 contract labourers. The destruction of jobs would be "painful." In addition, company management has also identified so-called reserves, i.e., further possible job cuts, which could impact the areas of electronic pre-installation and train control management services (TCMS) with outsourcing.

However, according to Wobst, management had developed more comprehensive plans that were blocked by the intervention of IG Metall and the works council. The employee representatives on the supervisory board had ensured, he declared with a nationalist undertone, that the company committed to invest in Germany, and not in "Best-Cost Countries," a reference to the Czech Republic, Poland, and China.

To throw dust in the eyes of the production workers, whose jobs are most at risk, he said that the shutdown of train production had been prevented, and that production of one train "on an industrial scale" and capacity for smaller-scale series was agreed. However, when questioned, the works council was unable to name any projects or contracts.

Wobst also celebrated as a success the "exclusion of compulsory redundancies until the end of 2019." But this was exposed as a hollow promise in the speeches. Daniel Perlzweig, the company representative, and Bombardier Germany head Michael Fohrer stated that on this issue the supervisory board had formulated nothing more than an "expectation," which was dependent upon the cost savings proposed by an "independent adviser" being

effective. Profitability would be reviewed again at the end of 2019, Perlzweig added.

“Bombardier is nothing more,” lectured Perlzweig at the beginning of the statement from the company’s board of directors, “than the plus or minus generated by people through the fulfillment of contracts.” In other words: the profitability of the company comes before everything else.

All of the company’s plants, which total 61 sites in 26 countries, have to compete in international benchmarking, Perlzweig continued. The losses of the German facilities, which had accumulated to around €900 million between 2012 and 2016, stood in stark contrast to the profitability of Bombardier Transportation globally, he added.

With undisguised cynicism, he blamed the workers at the German plants for this. He claimed that their colleagues outside of Germany had been forced over the past five years to fulfill contracts worth €20 billion “just to balance out our losses.” In the speech, he stressed the low wages in the plants outside of Germany, which make such profits possible.

An older worker told the WSWS at the gate prior to the meeting that plans had already emerged from top management to increase weekly hours worked, in violation of the collective agreement currently in force, and cut wages. In the “negotiations over detail” announced with the works council over the coming weeks, such demands could be raised once again.

The explanations from the works council merely served as an echo to management’s credo of competitiveness. It turned out that it was IG Metall which had engaged the consultancy firm Validated Advice from Dinslaken, recommending it as an allegedly independent expert.

Olivier Höbel, IG Metall’s head in the Brandenburg-Berlin-Saxony region, who is also a member of Bombardier’s supervisory board, was not seen at the employees’ meeting. The leader of IG Metall in Potsdam and Oranienburg, Stephanie Jahns, who was present, did not give a statement. Previously, Höbel had enthusiastically praised the supervisory board’s decision at a press conference. The union’s “own proposals and concepts to strengthen competitiveness” were included in the agreement, he declared.

At an employees’ meeting in Görlitz the previous day, where Fohrer justified the elimination of 800 jobs, IG Metall came to the defence of company management. “Of course we are not finished with the negotiations yet, so we have to give the negotiating partners a bit of space,” said Jan Otto, first secretary of IG Metall in eastern Saxony, as

he tried to reassure the workforce.

IG Metall and the works council have been engaged in secret talks behind the backs of the workers since last year, while loudly promising a struggle in defence of the jobs at protest rallies. Even now, they are solely concerned with deceiving workers about their true intentions.

The speech by Brandenburg’s SPD Economics Minister Albrecht Gerber, who was invited by the works council to the meeting, underscored that the plans for Hennigsdorf amount to the beginning of the end of train production. He cynically expressed his “deep dismay” and empathy for the workers. He wanted to ensure that other jobs could be brought to Hennigsdorf, he stated, and added soon afterwards that he had already established a special working group for this purpose in the state parliament. It would take up its work at the beginning of August.

The SPD-Left Party Brandenburg state government has long been aware of Bombardier’s planned job cuts. Following the supervisory board meeting, SPD Minister President Dietmar Woidke described the supervisory board decision as a partial success.

The conspiracy between company management, the trade union and the political parties was so obvious at the employees’ meeting that many workers simply awaited the end of the meeting in stony silence. A worker who left the meeting early told WSWS reporters at the entrance, “It’s all clear. They have agreed on death in stages.” Another hurled abuse at the works council, “For a lot of money, they allow company consultants to take decisions about us.”

A leaflet distributed at the front of the entrance by WSWS reporters and members of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) was met with great interest. The WSWS warned earlier this year that the defence of jobs required a struggle against IG Metall and the works council. The leaflet called for new organisations to be established independently of the existing trade unions to unite workers from all locations in Germany and internationally, and organise a struggle against capitalism, noting that workers at Bombardier facilities in Switzerland, Belgium, France, Italy and Eastern Europe also confront major attacks.



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