

# German industrial workers poised to launch massive strikes

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Germany's most important industrial sector, the metal and electronics industry, is on the brink of a major expansion of strike action. With 960,000 workers having participated in brief warning strikes and protests over the past two weeks, the IG Metall trade union has announced one-day strikes at 250 plants between Wednesday and Friday this week.

Despite its best efforts, IG Metall has failed to smother the movement surrounding the contract talks. The fifth round of bargaining collapsed because the union felt it could not, due to pressure from the workers, agree to a contract for the Baden-Württemberg region that would have served as a template for nearly 4 million workers nationwide.

The union and the employers' organisations blamed each other for the failure of the talks. The latter proposed a wage hike of 6.8 percent in two stages as part of a 27-month contract, which would equate to just 3 percent per year. The union proposed a 4.5 percent increase in wages in the first stage and a total increase of 8 percent over 27 months. This would amount to 3.6 percent per year, far below the original demand for a 6 percent annual increase.

IG Metall has also largely abandoned its demand for a temporary reduction in weekly working hours in exchange for a partial offsetting of wages. Stefan Wolf, head of the Sudwest Metall employer association, indicated that the union was prepared to agree as part of its proposal to increased working time in the plants. This would enable the companies to achieve their most important goal—the abandonment of the 35-hour workweek and its extension to 40 or even 42 hours.

The demand for a partial offsetting of wages for certain groups of workers, such as shift workers and workers who look after children or relatives in need of care, has been entirely cast aside by IG Metall. Instead,

workers would have the option of exchanging the second stage of the pay hike for additional holidays.

Despite the union's backpedalling, the talks collapsed because the pressure from rank-and-file workers was so great that the unions could make no further concessions to the employers without running the risk of losing control of the workers. However, IG Metall continues to do all it can to sell out the contract struggle.

To this end, the union did not declare that the talks had failed and it avoided calling a strike vote to authorise unlimited strikes. The 24-hour strikes, which were initially meant to take place immediately, were postponed until Wednesday so as to create another window of opportunity to reach a rotten deal.

The union also handed the employers an opportunity to go to court to block the strikes. Rainer Dulger, head of the industrial employers' association, has already announced his intention to file for an injunction against the strikes on Monday.

Even if the 24-hour strikes take place, IG Metall will strive to implement a rotten compromise immediately thereafter. Union head Jörg Hofmann explained the purpose of the strikes by saying that they should “increase the pressure on the employers to reach an acceptable compromise in the contract conflict.” *Manager Magazin* reported, “The contract parties had long considered making a final attempt to reach an agreement after another week of strikes in early February.”

The main factor behind IG Metall's determination to seal a sell-out agreement as quickly as possible, without obtaining even half of its original wage demand, is the ongoing talks over the establishment of a new federal government. The unions want at all costs to avoid risking a collapse of talks between the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the conservative parties

due to the pressure of a massive strike wave.

The German Trade Union Federation and IG Metall are fervent advocates of a new installment of the grand coalition, even though the SPD and the conservative parties bear responsibility for major attacks on the working class over the past 20 years, beginning with a massive tax cut that benefited the rich and followed by the Hartz labour laws, the Agenda 2010 social welfare reform, the lifting of the retirement age from 65 to 67 and a drastic deterioration of the health care system.

Germany has, as a result, become one of Europe's most unequal countries. More than 40 percent of the population earn less than they did 20 years ago. Some 3.2 million people have more than one job. The gulf between rich and poor has reached levels not seen since 1913. The 45 richest households own more wealth than the poorest half of the population.

German companies have also made huge strides in productivity. Workloads in the plants have risen continuously over recent years at the expense of workers' health and well-being. For many, stress levels have become unbearable. According to the industrial employers association, productivity per worker rose by 2.5 percent during the period January to November 2017 alone.

This increased productivity goes exclusively to fatten the profits raked in by executives and shareholders. By contrast, workers' wages have barely increased. The minimal pay hikes over the last decade have been eaten up by rising rent prices. A growing number of full-time positions are being replaced by low-paid temporary and contract labour. This is why the demands for a 6 percent pay increase and a temporary reduction in the workweek to be partially compensated secured strong support.

A new installment of the grand coalition would not only continue, but intensify the anti-worker policies of its predecessor. As has already been agreed in a paper published following the conclusion of exploratory talks, the new government's main task will be to strengthen the European Union and expand it into a military fortress capable of enforcing the global interests of German and European capital. The SPD and the conservative parties plan to cooperate with French President Emmanuel Macron, who governs under a de facto state of emergency and has initiated the greatest social counterrevolution since the founding of the Fifth

Republic.

The grand coalition's real goals—a massive military build-up and strengthening of the domestic state apparatus, and a corresponding hike in military spending—are being discussed only behind closed doors or in specialist publications. However, even the lead article in the latest edition of *Der Spiegel* made clear that the mad drive to war is not unique to US President Donald Trump.

In a piece titled "World Power Against Its Will," Ullrich Fichtner fantasised how, "In Manchester and Rome, in Warsaw and Lyon the window panes" will shake when Germany, which he compared to an "800-pound gorilla," moves. "Every child should know," according to Fichtner, "that a colossus like Germany has no choice whether or not to exercise power."

IG Metall, which fully supports the plans for a new grand coalition, will do everything to smother the contract struggle and sell it out. Workers who want to fight to retain their jobs and gain improvements in wages and working conditions must break with the trade unions and form independent action committees. The action committees must take control of the organization of the strikes and make contact with workers in other countries who want to fight against the global corporations and their respective governments.

Get in contact with the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and the *World Socialist Web Site*, which will support you in this struggle. The SGP calls for an expansion of the strike movement and for it to be made the prelude to a political mobilisation for new elections. The SPD and the conservative parties, in league with the trade unions, cannot be permitted to put their reactionary plans into practice.

The SGP is the only party calling for new elections and fighting in the working class for a programme that combines the fight against war and exploitation with the fight for a socialist society.



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