

Tens of thousands of German industrial workers on strike

Our reporters
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One-day strikes by industrial workers in Germany's automotive, metal and electrical industry began on Tuesday evening. According to figures from the IG Metall trade union, work stopped at 80 facilities employing some 68,000 workers on Wednesday. Strikes at an additional 200 operations will occur by Friday. Up to 500,000 workers are likely to take part in the strikes, making them the largest in this sector for 15 years.

The strikes are dominated by a glaring contradiction. While enormous anger over the enrichment of the corporations and continuous deterioration in working conditions exists among workers, the trade unions are doing everything to prevent a broad mobilisation of the working class and to sell out the strike.

IG Metall has long abandoned its original goal of a six percent annual wage increase. It has made major concessions to the employers' provocative offer of three percent by offering to agree to a 3.6 percent rise. In addition, the union has indicated its willingness to accept an extension of the 35-hour workweek. IG Metall has only called the strikes to let off steam before reaching a miserable deal with the employers.

"Our goal remains a deal without unlimited strikes," said IG Metall head Jörg Hofmann in Frankfurt on Wednesday. "IG Metall is as always interested in constructive solutions at the negotiating table. Our door is open for further talks."

However, the workers did not vote for strikes due to their expectation of such a deal, but because of their anger at years of wage stagnation. In every factory, they voted by an overwhelming majority for the protest. At the Mercedes Benz axel plant in Kassel, 98 percent of workers voted for a strike. At AVO Carbon, an autoparts supplier in Frankfurt/Main, 95.5 percent of IG Metall members voted to down tools for 24 hours

today. Votes at Grillo plants in Duisburg also saw majorities of close to 100 percent calling for strikes.

IG Metall is combatting this militant mood by doing everything to isolate each strike and prevent the development of a broader mobilisation. In a major logistical achievement, they distributed the 24-hour strikes over a three-day period, and ensured that not too many factories in a particular region were striking at the same time. Although the union is holding several mini rallies at specific plants when strikes begin, it has restricted attendance to one, or a select few, factories.

At machine manufacturer Coperion in Stuttgart, *World Socialist Web Site* reporters only met a small number of pickets. A trade union official who refused to give his name said that IG Metall was finding it very difficult to recruit workers for the pickets. Like all of Wednesday's strikes, it was concluded after 24 hours. When workers at Coperion recommenced work late Wednesday evening, the trade union called out workers at the Bosch plant in the same neighbourhood of the city, which will last until Thursday evening.

A similar picture emerged on the picket lines at Hanau Vacuum Smelting. The company was once considered a union stronghold, but IG Metall has also lost significant influence there. Three years ago, the union reached an agreement with US parent company OM to cut 200 jobs, meaning that only 1,400 workers are now employed at the plant. The strike vote in the plant was almost unanimous, but the picket line was thinly staffed.

Workers not only confront the ruthless action of one or another employer, but an international social counterrevolution, organised by the corporations, state apparatus and all political parties. In this conflict, the trade unions stand on the side of the corporations.

The international scope of the social attacks was

made particularly clear by the protests against the Siemens conglomerate, which has become the focus of anger because of its announcement of mass layoffs.

A delegation of Siemens workers from Görlitz rode almost 750 kilometres by bicycle to Munich to protest the closure of their plant. They were enthusiastically welcomed on Wednesday by Siemens workers from other locations, and they formed a lane through which participants in Siemens central shareholders' meeting in Munich's Olympia Hall had to pass. Siemens workers demonstrated in Frankfurt on the same day.

On Tuesday, Siemens CEO Joe Kaeser declared at the shareholders meeting that he was sticking to his programme of plant shutdowns despite mounting protests. "There is no alternative to the tough cost-cutting programme," he declared. At the same time, Kaeser defended his praise for US President Donald Trump. "I don't feel bad about congratulating the president on his tax reform."

During the World Economic Forum in the Swiss resort of Davos, Trump extended an invitation to 15 top CEOs from German and European companies. Kaeser sat next to Trump and spoke first, stating, "Since you were so successful with the tax reform, we have decided to develop our next generation of gas turbines in the United States." Trump added, "Oh, that's a big deal. That is fantastic."

Kaeser has close contacts in the chancellor's office and supports the formation of a grand coalition between the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD). He left no doubt about the fact that he expects the incoming German government to adopt a similar tax reform to benefit corporate interests and the superrich. Addressing the shareholders in Munich, he said that as the head of a global corporation, he must always orient its corporate strategy to where the best production conditions exist.

In their coalition talks, the CDU and SPD are preparing to implement Trump's programme in Germany. They are planning to form a government of social reaction, militarism, and the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus to enforce the most right-wing programme since the downfall of the Nazi regime. The major trade unions long ago declared their support for this project.

This is being discussed in the factories. Christian Schwarz has been employed in the Grillo plants in

Duisburg for close to 40 years. "I don't expect anything from the grand coalition, and certainly no social improvements," he said. "Many feel betrayed. And this is precisely why the [right-wing extremist] AfD is in parliament. And this is how it will continue."

One of his colleagues agreed, adding, "Initially, the SPD said it would go into opposition, now it is re-entering a grand coalition. They could not have lost more credibility if they tried."

At the BMW plant in Berlin, where a strike will take place on Friday, WSWS reporters met 34-year-old temporary contract worker Simon. He is not sure whether he will take part in the strike. Contract workers have been left with the option of staying at home or manning the picket lines. Temporary contract workers are not impacted by the current contract talks, because the trade unions have agreed to separate contracts for them which contain far worse conditions. IG Metall is deeply despised among this growing group of workers as a result.

Simon supports the call for new elections and is outraged that the coalition voted out of office on election day is preparing a new government behind the scenes. Workers produce the wealth for a minority but receive less and less of it, he complained.

He strongly supported the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei's (SGP) perspective of uniting workers internationally in struggle. "That's exactly it," he exclaimed. He listened to reports of spontaneous strikes against the trade unions in Romania with great interest. "It's a shame one hears so little about that," he said, and took a large bundle of SGP leaflets to distribute to his colleagues.



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