

German industrial workers shut down auto sector as strikes spread

Our reporters
2 February 2018

Industrial workers across Germany's automotive and electrical industries are fighting for higher wages and a voluntary reduction of the workweek with a third day of 24-hour strikes. Yesterday, they shut down the entire auto industry in southern Germany. More than half a million workers have expressed their readiness to fight by taking strike action.

Automakers impacted by the strike include Mercedes-Benz, Daimler, Porsche and Audi, as well as parts suppliers Bosch, Mahle, Schaeffler, Kolbenschmidt, Powertrain and ThyssenKrupp Rasselstein. Earlier, Ford workers at plants in Cologne struck and shut down all assembly lines.

At almost all the 250 companies where IG Metall held strike votes, between 95 and 100 percent of the workforce backed strike action. This speaks volumes about the workers' readiness for struggle. It is not merely a declaration of hostility to the executives in the boardrooms and their political representatives, but also the trade union itself, which is desperately seeking to restart talks with the corporations.

"Talks could be continued on Monday so long as the opposing side shows significant movement," said Roman Zitzelsberger, regional leader of IG Metall in Baden-Württemberg on Thursday. The union has already rented rooms in Stuttgart on Monday morning to host negotiations.

This is further evidence of the contradiction that has dominated the three days of strikes. IG Metall would prefer to end the strike as soon as possible, above all to avoid hindering the formation of a new grand coalition, which will be a government of social attacks, militarism and the strengthening of the repressive state apparatus. By contrast, the working class is ready to take up the fight against extreme levels of social inequality.

IG Metall sent its top representatives to the most important strike pickets so as not to lose control of the situation. Highly-paid union bureaucrats, who have backed the Social Democrats (SPD) in government for years and only days ago voted for a new grand coalition with the conservative parties, delivered pseudo-radical speeches to workers across

the country.

At the vacuum smelter in Hanau, Christiane Benner, the deputy leader of IG Metall, remained silent on the close connections between the IG Metall leadership and the committees and company supervisory boards responsible for the assault on social conditions. Benner is herself a member of BMW Munich's supervisory board, and her colleague on the union executive, IG Metall leader Jörg Hofmann, is a member of the VW and Bosch supervisory boards. Hofmann and Benner are both members of the SPD.

Meanwhile, anger is growing on the picket lines towards the anti-social and reactionary policies of a ruling elite which holds sway in the boardrooms and in government. Managers' salaries and bonuses are rising. Precisely those managers who attack "their" workforces most brutally are rewarded, such as at Siemens, ThyssenKrupp, General Electric and many more. The scale of social inequality is as great as it was a century ago. The Schaeffler family, which owns one of the companies where strike action is taking place, is among Germany's richest.

Many discussions on the picket lines revolve around these issues. Workers, who support the demands for higher wages and more family-friendly working hours, have suffered from speed-ups and have experienced major attacks on their working conditions.

André, who was picketing in front of the vacuum smelter in Hanau, explained why he supports the demand for reduced working hours. "When I started here, we had 2,500 workers, today we have just 1,400," he said. "Cutbacks were made everywhere. Departments were shut down, and machinery was shipped abroad. Whereas in the past the lights were on everywhere, now more than half of the firms are in darkness."

André has worked for the company for 28 years. When he was hired, the 40-hour workweek was still in force. "The struggle for the 35-hour workweek—that was supposed to divide up the work among more people to make jobs more secure in the long-term. That obviously didn't work. Here, the older people who are retiring are systematically not

replaced, and the burden for every individual has risen as a result. This impacts the electrical and fitting operations in particular, where the number of workers has long been insufficient. The few people left in these departments can barely cope with the workload.”

The Hanau Vacuum Smelter, one of the largest metal facilities in the state of Hesse, was considered an IG Metall stronghold in the Main/Kingzig district. Ownership of the plant has changed several times and anger is growing with the trade union, which recently agreed with US parent company OM to impose a further 200 job cuts. André said of IG Metall, “It is good for us that IG Metall exists, but they really need to impose themselves more forcefully!”

André did not think much of the ongoing talks on the formation of a new government made up of the SPD and conservative parties. “When the people are out of a job—who will look out for them? The shareholders only care if the figures are right, and everything is offloaded onto us. That is what has to change,” he said.

“The SPD has been on the other side for decades. They have nothing more to do with workers,” said Frank, a worker employed at Thermo in Langenselbold. “The political questions have to be publicised.”

He added, “We have young German-Russian colleagues, and they try to play them off against us, young against old, women against men, because they are a cheap labour force. Any of us who still have good collective contracts are described as an old burden.”

Frank also spoke about the Ford strike in Romania. “It is important that workers in different countries don’t allow themselves to be played off against each other. There’s a reason why they try to keep that quiet.”

IG Metall has carefully ensured that the contract struggle remains isolated from the fight to defend jobs at Siemens. This is a further indication of their nervousness. Siemens is currently planning unprecedented job cuts and intends to offload or shutdown plants in Erfurt, Görlitz, Leipzig, Offenbach and St. Ingbert. On January 31, the first day of the three days of strikes, Siemens workers protested at Siemens’ shareholder meeting in Munich and at the old Frankfurt stock exchange.

Hans-Jürgen Urban, a member of the IG Metall executive, spoke in Frankfurt. Siemens’ works councils and IG Metall group are clearly preparing to reach an agreement with the company’s board that will be a rotten sell-out.

Urban said that it is “nothing new that in the area where you work, there are problems. IG Metall works councillors have long offered to talk constructively about how to respond to these problems.” IG Metall is also “willing to attach value to things that are economically viable for the business being put into practice.” One only needs to deal

“fairly” with the workers.

It is becoming ever clearer that the industrial workers’ strike confronts political questions. While workers are fighting for higher wages and a shorter workweek, the SPD and conservative parties, with the full support of the trade unions, are in the process of forming a third installment of a grand coalition. Such a government would not only intensify the attack on the working class in Germany and across Europe, but also aggressively push ahead with the expansion of domestic state repression and militarism.

WSWS reporters and Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) members discussed the relationship between the government talks and the strike at many strike rallies. The WSWS statement calling for an expansion of the strike and for new elections was met with great interest.

It states, “As in the first half of the twentieth century, the working class faces the alternative of socialism or barbarism. To prevent the ruling class from imposing its programme of social counterrevolution and plunging the world into a catastrophic war, the working class must seize the initiative and unite internationally to overthrow capitalism.

“The strikes in the metal and electrical industries must be expanded. This requires a break with the IG Metall union, which is doing everything it can to stifle the strike. The union works closely with the employers’ associations, and most of its officials are members of the SPD and supporters of a new edition of the grand coalition.

“In order to expand the strike, rank-and-file workers’ committees must be set up to take control of the dispute and establish contact with workers across Europe and around the world. This is inseparably bound up with the fight for fresh elections to prevent the installation of a new grand coalition and advance a socialist alternative.”



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