

Auto parts workers strike in Germany

IG Metall accepts mass redundancies and plant closures

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The strike at the auto supplier Neue Halberg Guss (NHG) continues, but the strikers face a serious problem. Workers are striking to defend all of their jobs under threat in plants in Leipzig and Saarbrücken, but the IG Metall trade union has a very different perspective: “socially acceptable” job cuts.

The fact that IG Metall is not prepared to expand the strike on the basis of defending all jobs has only served to encourage company management to increase its attacks on strikers.

The Frankfurt Labour Court dismissed a temporary injunction sought by the company, which aimed to ban the labour dispute. This has led to an intensification of the strike by more than 2,000 workers in Leipzig and Saarbrücken who are fighting to prevent the wiping out of a thousand jobs and the closure of the Leipzig plant.

Neue Halberg Guss supplies the automotive industry—above all Volkswagen, but also Daimler and Opel—with engine blocks, cylinder heads and drive shafts. The company was acquired earlier this year by the Prevent Group owned by the Hastor family, which is haggling with its major customer, VW, over prices and terms of delivery. When the VW Group cancelled important orders from its supplier, management promptly decided to close its plant in Leipzig with 700 employees at the end of 2019 and cut 300 from the 1,500 workforce at its main plant in Saarbrücken.

On June 14, workers at both plants began strike action and the labour dispute has enjoyed broad and growing support from the population. Cars honk their support when they drive past the pickets and solidarity delegations arrive daily at the over 100-year-old factory in Leipzig, and the foundry in Saarbrücken-Brebach, where French colleagues also work.

The strike could become the focal point for a collective struggle of tens of thousands of auto workers, as it involves key issues that affect the entire auto industry. This was indirectly confirmed last Friday by Frank Hiller,

head of the Cologne Motor Works, which procures components from NHG. In a video Hiller appealed to “management, trade union leaders and politicians” to end the strike quickly, calling the labour dispute “madness” and “a unique situation in Germany.”

The fact is the entire auto industry is wracked by crisis. At VW, the largest NHG customer, temporary agency workers have been laid off, suppliers are being put under pressure and auto workers are being called upon to pay the price for the German diesel exhaust scandals. At the same time, thousands of jobs and wage cuts are on the agenda at Opel. Across Europe and around the world militancy among auto workers is growing, with spontaneous strikes at VW and Ford factories in Slovakia and Romania a few months ago.

For all of these workers, the strike by Halberg workers could prove to be a catalyst, but this is precisely what IG Metall wants to prevent. The strikers must face up to reality and not be fooled by the hollow phrases and empty promises of union officials. IG Metall has long since given up on the jobs and the factory in Leipzig. Its plan is to agree a contract as soon as possible and quickly suffocate the strike. It does not represent the interests of workers, but rather those of the German auto industry, especially the VW Group, where highly paid IG Metall officials sit on the company’s supervisory and management boards.

On July 12, negotiations were held in Frankfurt with NGH management. They were accompanied by protests and a demonstration in the banking metropolis. Here it became clear that the IG Metall is negotiating behind the backs of workers to enforce dismissals and factory closures.

The main slogan of the union, which it repeats continuously, is: “We want a social contract/ that’s why we are here today!” At the start of the protest action in front of the city’s main station the first speaker, Frankfurt IGM representative Michael Erhardt, spoke out in favour

of “the second best solution” and said that if the Prevent group wanted to make big profits, then it should be prepared to pay out money for layoffs.

At the location of the talks, an office tower on the city’s Opernplatz, Jürgen Kerner, a member of the IG Metall executive board, said: “We won’t allow them to asset strip and leave you with empty pockets. That’s why we’re calling for a training scheme and high severance pay.” Workers have to tell “greedy investors,” Kerner said, “We want to work, but if you won’t allow us to work, then at least pay up properly.”

These demands are aimed at enforcing the planned mass layoffs with redundant workers receiving a paltry severance. As the vice chairman of the works council of the Brebach plant, Mario Vangelista, made clear, IG Metall has long since abandoned “decent” wages and conditions.

“We have sacrificed everything for our jobs, e.g., overtime, holiday pay and Christmas bonuses,” the strike leader admitted. But now someone has come “who wants to break us.”

In fact, the factory in Saarbrücken is also under threat and nobody knows what will happen after 2019. Based on its trust in IG Metall, the company is pursuing a salami tactic: divide and conquer.

On Thursday IGM bureaucrats negotiated solely for “severance pay,” “rescue companies” and a “social wage agreement.” Not a word was said about the future of the Leipzig plant or the thousand jobs in acute danger. Instead IGM negotiator Uwe Schütz complained: “It seems that we are the only ones who want a quick solution to the conflict. The employer side contributed nothing today.”

For his part, IGM district chief Jörg Köhlinger told the Frankfurt Labour Court on Friday: “The IG Metall has no interest in a drawn-out labour dispute.”

The union is desperately seeking to prevent the struggle from spreading to other workforces and triggering a widespread political mobilisation. Already at the beginning of the year, IG Metall sold out the strikes of hundreds of thousands of workers in Germany’s metal and electrical industries in order to pave the way for the anti-working-class and militaristic policies of the ruling grand coalition government.

Encouraged by the actions of IG Metall, management actually decreased its offer in negotiations Thursday. NHG wants to pay the workers it dismisses just a fraction of what IG Metall is demanding, i.e., 40 percent of gross monthly salary for each year of service, just 0.4 months’ wages times the number of working years at NHG.

According to the principle of “divide and rule,” management has promised the remaining workers job protection until the end of 2019 and a return to the terms of the IG Metall contract on condition they stop their strike immediately. Such promises are just a flimsy manoeuvre to buy time for IG Metall to arrive at a quick negotiated solution and sell out the striking workers.

Many workers read the statement from the *World Socialist Web Site* “Defend all jobs at Halberg-Guss” Thursday. In the statement, the Sozialistischen Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) calls on workers to break with the unions and set up independent factory committees. “Not a single job can be sacrificed to the profit motive. Price and trade wars conducted by companies and the trade unions must be opposed by the international unification of workers. Factory committees must immediately get in touch with their colleagues at VW, Opel, Daimler and suppliers around the world and organise a joint fight.”

It continues: “Such a struggle inevitably brings the working class into conflict with the unions, the companies and the government. It can only be led successfully on the basis of a socialist perspective directed against the capitalist system.”

The WSWS leaflet sparked heated discussions and reactions. IG Metall officials reacted with anger and hostility while many workers expressed their interest and approval. When asked his opinion on IG Metall, Jean-Marie from Alsace said: “It is part of this whole compromise culture. Workers are not properly defended by the DGB (German Trade union Federation) and all of its unions. They are all in cahoots with the employers.”



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