

German Ford workers: “The yellow vests are going about it the right way”

Dietmar Gaisenkersting
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Many thousands of jobs will be lost in Europe due to the austerity measures announced by Ford Motor Company. Entire plants will be shut down. Ford in Cologne, Germany is the company's biggest factory in Europe. It is the European headquarters of the US corporation, employing around 18,000. Of these, about 4,000 workers build the Fiesta auto.

Members of the Socialist Equality Party (SGP) discussed the statement by the European parties of the Fourth International with Ford workers in Cologne. The statement directly addresses the Ford workforces in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and Russia and calls upon them to form action committees to initiate a joint counteroffensive. Above all, such a joint struggle must be conducted independently of the unions and their company representatives. The statement declares: “No faith can be placed in the trade unions, who will oppose nothing. Whether it be the CGT in France, the Unite union in the UK, IG Metall in Germany, or elsewhere, they all work as arms of management against workers.”

SGP members distributed the statement during the morning shift at 6:30 and returned eight hours later to discuss with workers during the midday shift change. Many had read the statement and agreed in particular with the passages describing the role played by the unions. “We don't expect much from IG Metall and the works council, better to keep away from them,” said one older worker angrily. He supported more militant protests and activities independent of the unions. “The yellow vests in France are going about it the right way.”

While the works council and management meet in Cologne behind closed doors to negotiate the cuts, the workforce is deliberately kept in the dark about their negotiations. “You know more outside than we do in here,” an older worker said bitterly. Others complained about the lack of information. “We hear nothing,” was the recurring response by many workers. IG Metall

representatives are due to meet at the end of the week, but it is doubtful that the workforce will learn anything meaningful.

Björn, a worker who discussed with the SGP earlier this year, reported that rumours were rife, because the works council had stayed silent. “They say only as much as necessary and as little as possible.” Apparently, the Focus model is to be built in Cologne, when production of the Fiesta expires in 2021. Currently, the Focus is produced in Saarlouis, where 6,000 employees fear for their jobs.

Björn's colleague Marcus believes that Ford has already decided to close the plant in Saarlouis. “If [Ford Europe boss] Gunnar Hermann says it will be produced in Saarlouis until 2024, then it is clear that 2025 is the end of the line,” he said. “It is just like it was in Belgium.” In 2014 Ford closed its plant in Genk, Belgium. All of the protests by workers at the time were in vain. Marcus soberly described how the European workforce is played off against one another. “Cologne will then build the Focus, the Fiesta can be produced more cheaply in Romania.”

Many workers are angry at their treatment following years of conscientious work. Some just want to leave and hope for some sort of compensation. “I'll go self-employed cleaning buildings with the compensation,” one reported. “Everything is going down the drain here.”

Alexandra finished her training as a construction mechanic last year and received a job contract until June 2019, but she does not want to stay at Ford. “The working environment is not so good,” she says diplomatically. She wants to work somewhere else, but does not know where yet. “It's not so easy to find work as a young woman in a predominantly male profession.”

Wolfgang, who read the statement, commented on the dividends Ford paid out last year. “When one reads they paid out \$2.3 billion to shareholders last year it takes one's breath away.” These financial cliques have to be

stopped, he said. In the course of discussion the European election candidate of the SGP, Dietmar Gaisenkersting, reported on the huge strike by auto workers in Mexico on the border with the United States. Wolfgang was surprised and knew nothing about it. Nobody had reported on the strike in Germany.

“I have not read the mainstream media for a long time,” he said. “They only report what they like.” Labour disputes were excluded, along with war crimes. “The crimes in Iraq, in Afghanistan, the use of uranium-enriched ammunition in the Balkans, etc., one heard nothing here in the press.” Wolfgang said he informs himself via critical media and websites on the internet.

Many workers expressed their anger about the current situation and contempt for the intrigues between the works council and management. Ford’s joint works council chairman in Europe, Martin Hennig, responded to the company’s plans by making his own suggestions on how to make Ford’s European offshoot more profitable.

In best management manner, Hennig complained to the German Press Agency (dpa) on Friday that Ford had a bad internal structure. “Far too many reports are written or meetings held that are not necessary.” The management work structure must be made leaner and more efficient, Hennig said.

Without mentioning numbers, Hennig emphasised that the “Redesign,” as he calls the forthcoming cuts, is in general, important. “We have to organise ourselves differently for the current situation.” His argument that personnel costs accounted for only 12 percent of the cost of a Ford car, and that therefore the automaker would have to cut costs differently, is despicable demagoguery. For example, when Hennig proposes cuts to suppliers, then that also means jobs lost.

At the end of his interview with the dpa, Hennig said: “There are only two options: Either we make the turnaround and become profitable, or we will be gradually closed down.” The workforce would do everything to move the company forward, he promised.

Workers should regard his comments as a warning. “Moving the company forward,” “making it competitive,” “organising it more profitably”—these phrases are constantly used by the works councils to prepare new cuts to jobs and working conditions. On the same basis the unions at Ford in Cologne have justified previous job cuts, the slashing of shifts and the reduction of bonuses.

The demand for an increase in competitiveness amounts to justifying an increase in profits. In reality, jobs can

only be defended if the control of wealthy investors and speculators is broken and production is based in a planned and democratically organised way to fulfill the needs of the population.

The SGP statement states: “The working class cannot accept the ‘right’ of the corporations to shut plants down, decimate entire communities and destroy the lives of tens of thousands of workers! Ford’s illegitimate actions are motivated by the single-minded desire to funnel ever greater sums of wealth into the pockets of its billionaire shareholders and financial speculators.” The critical task that workers now face is to wage an independent political struggle, as opposed to all the parties and organisations that defend capitalism.

“The answer is the taking of power by the working class as part of the fight for the United Socialist States of Europe, and the reorganisation of economic life by the working class to meet social need, not private profit. This will include turning the giant automotive corporations into public utilities under the democratic control of the workers. The European sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International are intervening in the European elections to fight for this perspective.”

The Socialist Equality Parties and the *World Socialist Web Site* will give every assistance to workers who wish to organise a fight against the auto layoffs and link up with their counterparts internationally, and we urge workers to contact us today.

The author also recommends:

Fight the Ford layoffs! Build rank-and-file committees to unite autoworkers across Europe!
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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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