

Germany: Riva steelworkers in Trier and Horath on strike for four weeks

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In Trier and neighbouring Horath, in Rhineland-Palatinate, around 150 steelworkers have been on strike for four weeks. They are fighting against the wage dumping of parent company Riva Stahl, which is trying to pit them against the rest of the workforce to force down wages.

For two years now, the Horath wire works, with plants in Horath and Trier, has belonged to the Italian Riva Group, which took it over on favourable terms in 2017 following bankruptcy. In Germany, Riva also operates two electro-steel plants in Brandenburg and Hennigsdorf, which it bought at rock-bottom prices after the dissolution of the former East Germany (GDR), and a plant for reinforcing steel in Lampertheim north of Mannheim, which it acquired in 2000.

Like the previous owners, the Riva Group is paying poverty wages in Trier and Horath, some of which are a third below the sector's union-agreed rates. For their hard and dangerous work, the steelworkers do not even earn €12 an hour on average.

As a result, the workforce took part in the protest strikes of the IG Metall union at the beginning of March, seeking a significant wage increase. The hope, however, was dashed. Up to present, Riva Stahl has refused to conclude a collective agreement. This was despite agreement in March with IG Metall of extremely modest wage increases in an attempt to prevent major industrywide strikes. Even in the east German plants, where there is an in-house collective agreement, Riva has not yet paid the workers this meagre improvement.

On June 11, steel workers in Trier and Horath decided by a large majority to take indefinite strike action. Since then, they have received increasing support from across the region, with many workers

facing similar conditions of exploitation. For example, workers at the Saarbrücken foundry New Halberg Guss (NGH) have joined a demonstration. They had also undertaken a long strike for their jobs last year.

The strikers want to prevent management from exploiting them against their colleagues in the other companies to push down their wages. Uwe and Florian, two striking workers, spoke with the WSW during a sit-in outside the Italian Consulate General on June 27.

“We do not agree that Riva should pay us so badly,” said Uwe. “That’s why so many have agreed not to accept that anymore.”

Both workforces, Horath and Trier, are 100 percent behind the strike, Florian said. “Our struggle is important for all steelworkers, because if we can be used against others to push down wages, then it will not be long before all steelworkers receive such lousy wages as we do.”

Another steelworker said, “We all have families. And many of us don’t know how we can finance our pensions with such small wages.”

The role of IG Metall

The strike at Riva expresses the growing combativeness of the working class. At the same time, it presents a real dilemma: The IG Metall union, which leads it, plays a key role in reducing jobs and wages. Even though its officials are now clamouring against the Riva management, the union created the conditions for Riva to pay starvation wages in the first place.

Since 1980, the number of jobs in the German steel industry has shrunk from 300,000 to just over 80,000.

In the last 16 years, the production volume has hardly declined, although the number of jobs fell sharply during this time, meaning the remaining steelworkers must work all the harder.

Every single job destroyed was with the signature of IG Metall and its works council representatives. They helped work out the plans for dismantling and decommissioning plants together with the representatives of capital in the joint union-management bodies. In the Ruhr area, once one of the largest steel-producing regions in the world, all that is left of the steel giants Thyssen, Krupp and Hoesch is a small remnant called ThyssenKrupp, whose winding down is currently being negotiated behind closed doors.

The well-paid union officials and works council representatives are not just corrupt, they advocate the same nationalist policies as the employers. They regard their task as defending the competitiveness of Germany as a production location against its international rivals. And for Germany to remain competitive, the steelworks must make high profits. To achieve this, they are ready to do anything. It is no coincidence that Peter Hartz, whose name was given to the hated Hartz IV welfare and labour “reforms,” is a member of IG Metall.

The union leaders also do not shy away from stabbing their own members in the back after weeks of labour disputes. Steelworkers in Hennigsdorf can tell a tale of woe about this. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1991, they sought to defend their 8,000 jobs through a week-long factory occupation. When the Treuhand, the agency charged with selling off and closing down much of the GDR’s industry, finally delivered the former VEB steel and rolling mill Hennigsdorf up to the Riva Group, only about 1,000 workers remained. Today there are just 700.

At that time, IG Metall made sure the job cuts passed smoothly and without resistance, and that those who were sacked disappeared for months and years into the so-called rescue and retraining companies.

The working class is an international class exploited worldwide by the same corporations and banks. Workers can only defend their jobs, wages and democratic rights if they join forces worldwide and fight for a socialist programme. It is not the profits of the corporations but the needs of the people that must be the yardstick of action.

IG Metall rejects this categorically. This was

particularly clear when IG Metall demonstrated in Berlin on June 29 for a “fair change.” It used the event to “beat the drum for trade war, fuel nationalism, and prepare mass layoffs,” the WSWS wrote.

In front of the Brandenburg Gate, Jörg Hofmann, the first chairman of IG Metall, called for “a strong European Union” to prevent “imports, such as steel, from being dumped on the European market,” in a clear call for trade war.

A delegation of Saarstahl shop stewards had even brought along a large poster with the inscription, “China Steel, soon available here.” They could not have shown more clearly that IG Metall is not based on the standpoint of the international working class but on the German steel barons. As if it were the brutally exploited Chinese steelworkers, and not the vastly overpaid managers and bankers, who are responsible for the attacks on jobs in Germany.

Riva steelworkers should therefore hold no illusions. Even if the company signs a collective bargaining agreement, this will not resolve anything in the long term. For IG Metall, it is about getting a foot in the door. After all, a whole army of 50,000 IG Metall works council representatives live from the joint union-management arrangements—and generally, are not badly paid for their services.

Once they are in operation, they are also willing to undermine industry-wide collective agreements and sign up to an in-house deal—as in Hennigsdorf. And if the corporation shuts the plant, they will not do anything except organise a few symbolic protests to blow off steam.

It is impossible to defend jobs and wages with the help of the nationalist trade unions. That is why the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) advocates breaking with IG Metall and setting up independent action committees to establish links with workers in other plants and countries, and jointly organise the fight against factory closures, layoffs and welfare cuts.



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