

IG Metall plays treacherous role in the Riva steelworkers strike

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14 September 2019

About 130 steelworkers employed at two factories of the Riva steel company in Trier and Horath (state of Rhineland-Palatinate) have been on strike since June 11. They struck to oppose the starvation wages imposed upon them, which are between 20-30 percent lower than the applicable scale for Germany's engineering industries. Now into thirteen weeks, the labor dispute is one of the longest in the history of the German Federal Republic.

The company's plant in Horath mainly produces steel sheeting for the reinforcement of concrete. In 2017, the Italian Riva Group took over the two plants from the French Sotralenz Group following two separate insolvency proceedings (2002 and 2016).

Since then, the situation has worsened. Working conditions at the two sites are catastrophic. Rain pours through the ceiling and the heating works only up to a temperature of seven degrees Celsius, according to workers who for many years have had to carry out their arduous shift work in extremes of hot and cold weather exacerbated by deafening noise in the production halls.

The Riva Group, which only took over these plants two and a half years ago, clearly intends to push the workforce to the limit. Little or nothing has been invested in the factories and management is not prepared to pay steel workers in Trier and Horath the contractually agreed (tariff) wage it awards workers in its factory in Lampertsheim (in the state of the Hesse). This is despite the fact that Riva doubled its profits last year. In order to prevent the strike from spreading, Riva recently struck a deal with the IG Metall trade union to pay tariff wages to its workers employed in Brandenburg and Hennigsdorf.

The steel workers in Trier and Horath have every right to strike for equal wages, better conditions and job security. In so doing they have made great personal sacrifices over the past three months.

The problem, however, lies in the fact that the IG Metall is cynically abusing the worker's militancy. The union's agenda is diametrically opposed to the aims of the striking workers. It has organised a great deal of media fanfare

around the strike in order to portray itself as a "fighting union," but its goal is to consolidate its control at as many factories as possible and suppress growing criticism of its intimate collaboration with the German government and company executives.

In reality, IG Metall is preparing for a massive wave of redundancies and plant closures. The effects of the international economic crisis, escalating international trade war, the US sanctions against China and economic decline in a number of European countries have had major repercussions for Germany's export-dependent economy and in particular its engineering sector.

The striking Riva workers cannot limit their struggle to the demand for equal contract pay, even if this would lead to a short-term improvement in wages. At many companies IG Metall uses contractual tariffs as a strait jacket to enforce the regroupment of a section of workers and impose a ban on strikes within the framework of the German system whereby one cannot strike once a contract has been reached ("peace agreement").

The Riva strike must be seen by workers as part of a growing radicalisation and militancy. Everywhere the alarm signals are ringing. One rationalisation follows the other. Secure long term jobs are being replaced by temporary work, work contracts and other forms of low-wage employment. Millions of employees are classified as poor despite working full-time.

This development is international with millions of jobs at stake. A few weeks ago, Ford announced job cuts of 12,000 and BASF announced it would slash 6,000 jobs in Europe. Since the beginning of the year, General Motors has announced 14,000 job cuts, including the closure of 5 factories in North America, Volkswagen 7,000, Jaguar 4,500 and Tesla 3,000 layoffs—and that's just the tip of the iceberg.

A study by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) last autumn concluded that a rapid conversion to electro-mobility would endanger 600,000 jobs in the German auto industry and lead to the ruin of many suppliers. At the same time, adherence to traditional production methods and

“postponing system innovations” would have equally catastrophic consequences.

Joint international cooperation and struggle by all workers is becoming increasingly important, but this can only be achieved in a struggle against IG Metall and its nationalist program of collaboration with the companies and government. The role of the unions is that of labor contractors, seeking to hold down wages and benefits in order to allow national industry to compete against its overseas rivals.

This is the real role IG Metall, despite occasionally radical sounding bombast by certain union officials.

IG Metall is deeply integrated into the management of Germany’s engineering industries. It is playing a key role nationwide in cutting jobs, wages and social gains. Together with its ally, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), IG Metall bears the main responsibility for the massive expansion of temporary, insecure and low-wage jobs. It is no coincidence that Peter Hartz, patron of Germany’s notorious Hartz laws, is a member of both the SPD and IG Metall.

The number of jobs in the German steel industry has declined from 300,000 to 80,000 since 1980, while the volume of production has remained steady or even increased. All of the job cuts bear the signature of an IG Metall official and in every case it is the union and its works councils who draw up the redundancy plans in collaboration with the managers.

IG Metall is whipping up nationalism and calling upon the government to conduct trade war, based on its goal of defending and strengthening the competitiveness of German companies on the world market. This strategy was underlined by the last nationwide IGM demonstration in Berlin (“Fairwandel”), at which IGM chairman Jörg Hofmann openly called for protectionist measures.

The working class is an international class and is exploited worldwide by the same corporations and banks. Workers can only defend their jobs, wages and democratic rights by uniting worldwide and fighting for a socialist program. Priority must be given to social needs, not the profits of the corporations.

Such a perspective requires a relentless struggle against the nationalist program of the unions. Anyone who regards the IGM call for an International Day of Action on 17 September at Riva sites in Germany, Italy, Spain, Belgium and France as a step towards international cooperation between workers is deeply mistaken. Exactly the opposite is the case. These are international meetings to promote the union’s policy of nationalism.

These meetings will be attended by a few hundred union bureaucrats and will advance close cooperation between the union and company executives within the context of “social

partnership”.

While the IG Metall organises a phony international day of action and flowery speeches, it is doing all it can to effectively isolate the struggle carried out by Riva workers, allowing the strike to exhaust itself.

The cynicism of IGM officials is everywhere evident. Just last week, the Works Council Conference East in Berlin handed the workforce of the former Neue Halberg Guss (NHG) company an award for their labor dispute last year, citing it as a “lesson in solidarity, courage, fighting spirit and stamina”. The NHG workers achieved “what at first sight seemed unimaginable”, declared IGM chairman Hofmann, namely a successful end to their industrial action.

But what does this success look like? The former NHG factories in Leipzig and Saarbrücken are still fighting desperately for survival. They now belong to the investor group One Square Advisors GmbH, which publicly describes its new properties as “in need of renovation” and has made clear that the creditworthiness of the plants in the long term depends on fresh orders from its main customer, VW Autos.

In the middle of July it was announced that another 200 of 1,200 casting workers will be fired in Saarbrücken. According to the *Saarbrücker Zeitung*, the cuts had been agreed by management and the works council. The top official of the IGM in Saarbrücken, Patrick Selzer, regards the job losses as a “painful step, but probably necessary,” the newspaper wrote.

“All these years we fought for nothing”, was the bitter comment by one worker from the Gusswerke steel casting company in Saarbrücken.

To advance their struggle Riva workers must reach out to their real allies, not IG Metall union officials but rather all those workers internationally now coming into struggle. This requires the building of action committees, independent of the unions, to conduct a genuine fight.

The Socialist Equality Party, affiliated to the International Committee of the Fourth International, and its internet publication, the *World Socialist Web Site*, are fighting for just such a perspective. We call on the Riva strikers and all workers to contact us to discuss these issues.



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