

Germany's IG Metall union calls for alliance with government and corporations against workers

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The 24th regular congress of Germany's IG Metall trade union concluded last Saturday in Nuremberg. "The trade union congress takes place under conditions of major turmoil and uncertainty," stated a press release from the union. In the course of a week, the nearly 500 delegates discussed how they intend to respond.

The appeal made by the congress of "the world's largest single trade union," as IG Metall, with its 2.2 million members, likes to refer to itself, was for the ruling elite to cater to the needs of its substantial bureaucracy so as to prepare the attacks on the workers that are necessary if Germany is to arm itself for impending trade war. To this end, IG Metall is offering the services of its apparatus, 50,000 works councillors, and 80,000 union representatives to ensure labour peace in the factories and impose the cuts.

"Conflicts in the world market are rising, technology is becoming ever more productive, and climate change ever more urgent," declares a document entitled "Manifesto—IG Metall in a new era." It added that major transformations will powerfully impact on "our factories." It continued: "Many people work in jobs that won't exist tomorrow. [...] The issue posed is one of fundamental change, nothing less than a transformation of our economy, our way of life and work." At stake is the future of a "made in Germany" industry, continued the document.

Already prior to the trade union congress, IG Metall leader Jörg Hofmann warned in a series of interviews that up to 150,000 jobs in the auto industry alone are at risk due to the turn toward production of Electric Vehicles (EVs).

Overall, millions of jobs are at risk. Ford has already this year announced the slashing of 12,000 jobs in Europe, with half of these layoffs to take place in Germany. General Motors plans to cut 14,000 jobs, Audi and Daimler 10,000 each, Volkswagen 7,000, Jaguar 5,500, and Tesla 3,000. Opel has already announced 1,100 job cuts in Germany. Last month, BMW announced it would cut up to 6,000 jobs. Porsche has cut back production at its Leipzig factory since August, affecting around 500 contract workers.

The related industries, including the auto parts, chemical, and steel sectors, also have an uncertain future. Continental has

announced 20,000 job cuts and Schaeffler 900. The bankruptcy of Eisenmann has affected 3,000 workers. Bayer plans to eliminate 12,000 jobs worldwide (including 5,000 in Germany), while BASF has begun cutting 6,000 jobs. To date, ThyssenKrupp has indicated it will reduce its workforce by 6,000. However, new chief executive Martina Merz informed the workforce in a letter last Wednesday "that we won't be able to avoid significant (additional) job cuts in several sectors." At Saarstahl, some 1,500 jobs are set to go. Last Tuesday, Outokumpu informed its works councillors that an additional 300 jobs will be cut at the steel producer.

These announcements are the tip of the iceberg. IG Metall expects that no sector will be left untouched. "Procedures, structures, and activities will change, while company cultures and the profiles of professions will be placed under review." Under these conditions, IG Metall appeals to the strong state. "For this we need state action, so that industrial, structural, labour market, family, and education policymakers work together." The state ought to invest, regulate, and prevent wage cutting, adds the union. IG Metall is aiming at collaborating with the state. "We will actively frame the change ourselves," the union writes.

The union is seeking corporatist cooperation at many levels: advisory funds for works councillors, particularly in small and mid-sized companies, regional and transformation alliances at the next level up, and membership in the top committees and funds that take decisions on state investment.

The IG Metall's main demand is a "transformational benefit for short-time workers" to be paid to laid off workers. In the hope that new jobs emerge, short-time workers should be retrained.

Many workers will recall what these terms signify. After all, it was with promises of "transformational short-time working benefits" retraining and qualifications, new jobs, and "blossoming landscapes" that the industries in the former East Germany were destroyed 30 years ago, throwing millions of workers onto the streets. Ever since, IG Metall has enforced lower wages and worse working conditions in the east compared to western Germany. Just last week, companies

announced that they have no plans to introduce the 35-hour workweek that exists in western Germany.

The lower wages and poorer working conditions in eastern Germany and Eastern Europe have been used by the companies and unions as a battering ram to impose lower wages, introduce temporary workers and shut down entire plants across Germany.

As the congress opened, Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (Social Democrats, SPD) offered to cooperate with the union. All “instruments of labour market policy” are ready to respond to the anticipated crisis, he noted.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel (Christian Democrats, CDU) addressed the delegates last Wednesday to strengthen the government-union partnership. It is necessary “that we stay in close contact given the current developments,” said Merkel.

At the end of June, IG Metall organised a demonstration in Berlin with the aim of securing a pact between the government, trade union, and companies. The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (SGP) opposed this policy, distributing a leaflet which declared, “IG Metall is not concerned about wages and jobs, nor ecology or democracy. That would require a struggle against the government and corporations, not an appeal to them.”

Since then, IG Metall’s hypocritical and dishonest propaganda has only been intensified, reaching new heights of absurdity. In its “manifesto,” in a reference to Marx and Engels’s Communist Manifesto, IG Metall concludes with the demand, “Employees of the world, get together! Don’t let yourselves be played off against each other!”

The trade union scribblers responsible for such drivel should be buried beneath the countless contracts agreed to by IG Metall officials and works councillors which imposed job cuts, wage reductions and speed-up so that factories would be closed in other countries rather than Germany.

It is the trade unions, with IG Metall in the lead, that have divided workers regionally and nationally, and enforced concessions demanded by the companies with their nationalist slogan of “plant defence.” In the past, trade union officials and works councillors have created the mechanisms to facilitate this process, including at Volkswagen and Opel. And Peter Hartz, who drafted the Hartz laws which bear his name, measures that gutted social welfare spending, is not only an SPD member, but also a member of IG Metall.

The officials in the trade unions and works councils are paid handsomely for their services. VW works council chairman Berndt Osterloh receives up to €750,000 annually, while former Porsche works council chair Uwe Hück raked in up to €500,000 per year. Berthold Huber, who in 2010 celebrated his 60th birthday in the Chancellor’s office with Merkel, VW chief executive Martin Winterkorn, other corporate CEOs and works council heads, took over the post of chairman of VW’s supervisory board in the course of the diesel scandal for six months.

The trade unions’ drive to integrate their organisations into the state has deep objective roots. Following the Second World War and into the 1970s, the unions were able within the framework of the nation-state to obtain social concessions from the corporations and the state to maintain the status quo. The globalisation of production pulled the rug out from under such nationalist and reformist policies.

With the resurgence of the class struggle and the eruption of conflicts between the major powers, above all since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the trade unions have drawn ever closer to their paymasters in the corporate boardrooms and state apparatus. They no longer apply pressure to management to secure concessions for the workers, but rather blackmail workers into accepting wage cuts and social spending cuts in order to improve corporate competitiveness. They have been transformed into direct tools of the corporations and the state, all in the name of defending “made in Germany” production.

The inevitable consequence of this nationalist policy is trade war and military conflict. Seventy-five years after the end of World War II and 30 years after the collapse of Stalinism, the great powers are once again in the midst of violent conflicts over markets, raw materials and global influence, and are prepared to deploy nuclear weapons.

As they did prior to World War I and World War II, the trade unions have once again embraced German militarism so as to defend “made in Germany” against its international rivals.

In a globalised world, workers can only defend their rights and social achievements by coordinating their struggles internationally and adopting a socialist perspective.

This requires a break with the trade unions and the building of independent rank-and-file committees. These committees must organise a struggle against plant shutdowns, layoffs, and social spending cuts, and make contact with workers at other production sites and in other countries.

We call on all workers who wish to fight back against the attacks being planned by the corporations to contact us.



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