

German autoworkers protest as unions sanction wave of jobs cuts

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Last Friday, the IG Metall trade union organized a day of action on the Schlossplatz in the centre of Stuttgart. The unions called the protest in hopes of dissipating the anger of workers who are increasingly denouncing IG Metall and its works councils for collaborating in the slashing of tens of thousands of jobs in the auto and auto parts industries.

Stuttgart in Baden-Württemberg is one of the most important centres of the German car industry, but resistance by workers against the corporations, trade unions and the grand coalition government of the Christian Democrats and Social Democrats is developing throughout Germany.

Car production is Germany's most important industry with 820,000 jobs in manufacturing and supply chain. About the same number work in the sales, repair and service sectors. With global sales declining and an increasingly bitter struggle to cut costs and dominate the market for electric vehicles—which require less labor than traditional internal combustion engine vehicles—the fate of one and a half million people lies in the balance.

Hardly a day passes without a large or small company in Baden-Württemberg announcing redundancies and cost-savings measures. Bosch, the leading supplier, has already eliminated 2,500 jobs this year. By 2022, 3,000 more are to follow in Schwäbisch Gmünd, Feuerbach, and other locations.

At suppliers Mahle, Mann+Hummel and Marquardt, 3,000 workers have already lost their jobs this year. Tyre manufacturer Continental is planning to cut 7,000 jobs nationwide, ZF Friedrichshafen 2,300 jobs and Schaeffler 700.

On Tuesday, Audi announced it would be cutting 9,500 of its 61,000 jobs in Germany by 2025, only hiring 2,000 experts in e-mobility and other future-oriented fields. The company reached an agreement with the works council on the cuts after several months of negotiations.

Audi, which belongs to the VW group—the world's second largest automaker—wants to generate around six billion euros through the savings program, and thus increase its target yield from nine to eleven percent. Audi is trying to catch up with the other two luxury brand manufacturers, Mercedes and BMW, who are also implementing massive redundancy and cost-cutting measures.

The announced reduction is only the beginning of an unprecedented jobs massacre. In Baden-Württemberg alone, 470,000 people work in the production of vehicles with combustion engines. The Centre of Automotive Management at the University of Applied Sciences of Economics in Bergisch Gladbach has calculated that 10 to 15 percent of jobs in the automotive industry will be lost in the next ten years.

In the end, there could be considerably more. Companies are making the extent of the cuts dependent on their profit rates rising. Professor Oliver Falck, automotive expert at the Ifo Institute, said, “How many of these jobs will be lost depends on how many of the electric cars that will be in demand worldwide in the future are built in Germany, and how fast the increase in electric vehicles will be.”

Daimler workers in Sindelfingen, Untertürkheim and Mettingen, who spoke to WSWs reporters in recent weeks, said that their colleagues felt insecure because everyone feared for their jobs. Neither management nor IG Metall had told them anything and many workers expressed their anger with IG Metall for abandoning them.

At Daimler Untertürkheim, where combustion engines are produced, the works council has been negotiating the future of 19,000 jobs since mid-October. This has focused on what concessions the workers will give up so that the electric drive train (EATS)—consisting of electric motor, transmission parts and power electronics—can be produced

in this plant.

One month before the start of negotiations, works council chairman Michael Häberle said, “If we don’t get this product here, we will lose jobs in the long term.”

Three months later, at the action day in Stuttgart, the same Häberle said with the usual trade union bluster, “For a long time, I was sure that the company also recognized this urgency and would support our production location.” But during the negotiations, it had become clear to him that the current financial situation had “clouded the farsightedness of our Executive Board.”

Häberle, who himself sits on the Supervisory Board and is involved in the decisions of the Executive Board, indicated that the Untertürkheim site was not secure and that he had already agreed to job cuts. “Instead of developing future prospects with us, several companies are announcing job cuts and production relocations,” he complained.

This turns things upside down. In the name of its “future prospects,” IG Metall has already given the go-ahead to the reduction of more than ten thousand jobs at Bosch, Mahle, Continental, ZF and Schaeffler, and will do the same at Daimler.

At the Schlossplatz in Stuttgart, IG Metall regional director Roman Zitzelsberger once again offered the companies the services of the union, “All employers must know: shaping the future is only possible together,” he said. “Change is coming, and we must not bury our heads in the sand.”

The managing director of the employers’ organisation Industrieverband Südwestmetall expressed a very similar view. Peer-Michael Dick told the Tagesschau before the day of action, “Employees must go along with this transformation, they must be ready for change, they must educate themselves further. But jobs will also be lost, so we as employers, but also IG Metall, must be honest. Unqualified people, poorly qualified people and simple jobs will be lost in the transformation process”.

Dick told the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* that the IG Metall would have to make concessions in the collective bargaining round that starts at the beginning of 2020, “Without sacrifices, the transformation will not succeed.” It was about more than one agreement, it was about “the future of the social partnership” with the unions. According to Zitzelsberger, IG Metall is already negotiating cost-cutting plans and staff reductions in 160 metal companies in Baden-Württemberg.

The statements by Dick, Häberle and Zitzelsberger must be taken as a warning. As a partner of the car companies,

IG Metall is helping plan and implement these social attacks. Like its union counter-parts throughout Europe and the world, IG Metall functions as a company police force and its officials are highly rewarded for suppressing the resistance of workers.

In a telling comment, *Stuttgarter Zeitung* wrote that in the current crisis, job security is the top priority, not “significant wage growth.” It continued, “The union is reversing course at a fast pace—that’s a good thing. Now it has yet to convince all its members of the new course. ... In the worst-case scenario, Baden-Württemberg could be threatened by creeping deindustrialisation.”

In fact, it is IG Metall’s collaboration with the corporations that is leading to deindustrialization. The consequences would be devastating for hundreds of thousands of workers and their families. This can only be prevented if workers take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file action committees, which are independent of the pro-capitalist and nationalist IG Metall and other unions.

The introduction of new technologies such as electric vehicles and artificial intelligence into the production process is a progressive development that could reduce workloads and raise the standard of living of all. But under capitalism, these technologies are being used to toss workers into the streets where they will starve right next to the riches they have produced. That is why workers themselves must take control of production, as part of a broader struggle for socialism and reorganization of world economy to meet human needs, not private profit.

The Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party) and its sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International are fighting for this perspective. We urge workers to contact us to take up the fight for rank-and-file action committees and international socialism.



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