

Workers in Germany support French workers' strike against Macron

Our reporters
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Last week, WSWs teams discussed the strike by French workers against the Macron government's attack on pensions with Opel workers in Rüsselsheim (near Frankfurt) and Siemens in Berlin. On December 17, a meeting of the SGP (the Socialist Equality Party in Germany) in Berlin discussed the international significance of the strike movement in France.

The Siemens workers were very interested in the strike and expressed their support for the strikers in France. Two sentences constantly came up: "In France they know what to do, they must not give in!" and, "We should all fight together in Europe, or we will all die, each in his own corner."

The Siemens plant is one of those affected by massive layoffs. A few months ago, hundreds of workers protested at several sites against the job cuts negotiated with Siemens by the IG Metall union. Many workers are aware that they are dealing with a transnational group that operates around the world and can do wage dumping because unions isolate their actions by confining them to the local level. With the help of the unions, Siemens pits workers against each other internationally, though workers face the same problems in every country.

There was widespread sympathy with French workers in struggle. "Pensions in the EU should all be equal and high, the retirement age should fall. But we have to do it together," **Axel** told the WSWs, adding that unions had done nothing when the retirement age was raised to 67 in Germany.

Anne, in her fifties, worked at Bosch and another large company. Things are going very badly at Siemens after the intervention of the McKinsey consulting firm, she said. "We should all stop working for a few days, everyone." **Armin**, a 75-year-old worker from Macedonia and former employee of Siemens, where his

son works today, invoked the strike in France: "Yes, the French are on strike, but when the retirement age was raised in Germany, no one protested. Many were so deceived by the media and the unions that no one seriously fought against pension laws."

"The media always say that Germany is the richest country. But there are so many homeless people here because rents are going up... Millions of people are working as temporary workers and living with the bare necessities," he said.

"I have now been working at Siemens for nearly 18 years, eight years as a temp and now ten years as a permanent worker," says **Petra K**., a worker in transmission production. "The strike of French workers is very important. They must at all costs avoid the deterioration of the pension system because it is their future."

She also said that European workers must cooperate more closely and support each other. In Germany, one could see the effects of Hartz IV (the end of full unemployment benefits, the unemployed being forced to live on 400 euros per month) and wages that drop because of temporary work. "The result is poverty for the elderly. That's why I say we have to stand together and fight together."

She added: "Sometimes I think that we underestimate the common struggle, and that everyone thinks only of himself and his family. When I was working as a temp and barely making a living, I felt abandoned. Even the union was not interested at all. It has to change, we workers have to talk to each other more and take care of each other more. That is also why we need to look at what is happening in France."

Sven S., who has worked for 28 years at Siemens, said: "Here at the company it's still too quiet. French workers are more advanced. If we don't want to sink,

we will have to fight. That's for sure. I can't stand all this talk about the company's financial problems anymore. It's all nonsense."

Jamal, a Palestinian worker; said: "Yes, I think the strike in France is very good.... In my opinion, the Palestinian and Israeli workers must cooperate. Religious conflicts are always stirred up to impose the interests of the imperialists. But it is not a question of religion, but of the rich and the poor. We need to know more about each other, so we can fight better together."

At the shift change at Opel, most workers also spontaneously say about strikes in France: "They're doing it well," and "it's high time we did it here."

"They are right!" says **Alfredo**, who works on the production line and was waiting for a colleague. "In France it is not like here ... The French don't put up with it, but here it is not the same. Everyone thinks about themselves and the union does nothing. But the whole auto industry is in crisis! Sooner or later, it will have to stop here as well."

A technician at the research centre also said, "Over there in France, they're doing it right." Then he explained that he has just been sacked with other colleagues because he refused to be transferred to the service provider Segula. "What is happening there is important for all of us," he said of the events in France.

Opel is deeply affected by the automotive crisis. Since its takeover by French automaker PSA, several thousand jobs have been destroyed. There is often short time work. The announced merger of PSA with Fiat Chrysler increases insecurity over jobs.

"It's all a bottomless pit," says **Frank**. "It's remarkable that even subcontractors like Bosch are now laying off. A job at Bosch used to be like life insurance. Or you could take GM, the former owner of Opel, it has turned the whole structure of the company upside down."

On the strike in France, he said: "This is really something: the street is burning over there. It was foolish of Macron to attack pensions. In France, all politicians trying it have failed until now."

Workers in Germany had to "gain more self-confidence," he continued. For shareholders on the stock exchange, the automotive industry is just a big drag. "Those who actually manufacture the product must in fact be the most recognized of all. There are people here who work and are worth more than gold.

They're there because their fathers and grandfathers were already at Opel. They would give anything for the firm. But they get their faces slapped. For shareholders, these are just numbers."

Steffen, Stefan and Mario said striking is the right thing to do. "If you don't defend yourself, you don't get anywhere," said Steffen.

"The situation is getting worse and worse. It's never been as tense as it is today," Mario said of his own situation as an auto worker.

Of the IG Metall, Mario said, "It's more apparent than real," to which Stefan added, "Like all the others, they look to see on which side there is the most money, and it is not us."

Andreas, a worker who has worked for 22 years on the production line, said: "French workers are right to defend retirement at the age of 62. Everyone here will confirm that at 67 they are no longer able to work on the production line. It is real torture!"



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