

Germany: IG Metall and works council force Volkswagen workers back despite coronavirus danger

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Most Volkswagen workers know that the IG Metall trade union and its works council representatives are in cahoots with company management and have taken on the role of industrial police and corporate cheerleaders. But the spectacle they are now providing at VW headquarters in Wolfsburg puts all that has gone before in the shade.

On Monday, after a five-week break, production started up again at Volkswagen's main plant, the largest car factory in Europe with 63,000 employees. The company is playing roulette with the health and lives of its workforce. The dangers represented by the COVID-19 pandemic have not been banished, either in Germany or worldwide. All serious scientists stress that a rise in infections like those in Italy or the US can only be prevented if social distancing measures are maintained, tightened and supplemented by comprehensive testing and contact tracing measures.

This is exactly what is now being breached in Wolfsburg. For sales, profits and dividends to flow freely again, and for VW to gain a strategic advantage over its competitors, tens of thousands of workers and their families will be put at risk.

The IG Metall and the works council have taken on the task of driving workers back into the factory and are accompanying this with a propaganda offensive that they are also publicly boasting about.

From last Friday to Monday, a high-performance projector beamed lies, fake news and other propaganda in endless loops onto the façade of the company's own power plant for three nights, seeking to sell the resumption of work as a triumph to workers at the plant and the people of Wolfsburg. The action was organized and financed by the works council and the IG Metall union. An official statement by the union reads:

“The messages at the power plant are provided by a

high-power projector, which makes a 160 square metre facade shine. Around 30 motifs can be seen in a loop of about five minutes. They range from sentences such as ‘Start the plant, slow down the coronavirus’ to multilingual coronavirus hashtags and the VW logo bearing a face mask.

“Four colleagues from Chinese plants also appear [in the video] at the power plant. They work in Beijing, Changchun, Shanghai and Tianjin. Their motivational messages can be seen in Chinese and in translation. The Volkswagen plants are already back on the grid in China, the world's largest car market. ...

“Part of the projection is also a sequence that runs like a flipbook. First a coronavirus appears, followed by the Volkswagen logo, which gradually crushes the virus. At the end of the sequence, the winning VW logo finally signals ‘Everything's great, thumbs up’.”

The fact that resuming work will not defeat the virus but creates the best conditions for it to spread is of course also known by the IG Metall and the works council. Their propaganda that VW workers would be protected by “about 100 measures in the best possible way when working in coronavirus times” does not change this fact.

Works council head Bernd Osterloh (annual income up to €800,000) admitted openly that the aim was to set an “industry standard” in order to ramp up production throughout Germany. He said the resumption of production at VW in Wolfsburg was “a noteworthy starting signal for the entire industry during the coronavirus crisis.” He added that interest in the scheme extended as far as Japan.

Ricarda Bier, IG Metall's representative in Wolfsburg, also boasted, “It is particularly important to us that this action proves once again that Volkswagen does not end at the factory gate. The coronavirus pandemic clearly shows

us that our society is at its most efficient when everyone shows solidarity and there is no room for selfishness.” By “selfishness” the trade union official apparently means workers’ concern for their health.

Bier commented on the motifs used in the video projection, saying they showed “the sense of solidarity between the workforce, the city and the region. For we all stand firmly together, especially in times of crisis.”

In fact, there is a deep gulf between workers and small business owners on the one hand, whose existence is threatened by the pandemic, and the corporate bosses and owners on the other hand, who are being showered with money by the German government and who are happy about rising share prices.

The trade union policy of “social partnership” is increasingly reminiscent of the corporatist policy of the Nazi regime, which proclaimed the “Volksgemeinschaft” (“national community”) and eventually sent millions of workers to their deaths at the front under the slogan “For Führer, People and Fatherland.” In view of the fact that the main VW factory and the city of Wolfsburg were built by the Nazis in 1938 for the production of the “Kraft-durch-Freude-Wagen” (“power through joy car”), the propaganda of the IG Metall displays dangerous historical amnesia. It sends the workers back to the production lines and projects its video message: “For factory, city and region.”

VW workers can only defend their health, incomes and rights if they break with the unions, unite internationally and fight for a socialist programme. The subordination of society to the profit interests of a small super-rich minority must be ended. The huge fortunes and key industries must be expropriated and the billions and trillions now flowing into the accounts of the banks and large corporations and into the military must be used to expand hospitals, protect the population from the virus and offset the social consequences of the crisis.



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