

Germany: Daimler trains managers to kick out workers

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Stuttgart car manufacturer Daimler is using the coronavirus crisis to expand and accelerate mass layoffs. The reduction of 10,000 jobs announced months ago is to be extended and accelerated. Finance daily *Handelsblatt* now reports of 15,000 planned layoffs.

To suppress the expected resistance of the workforce, department heads and other managers are being trained to put pressure on individual workers to sign a termination agreement or—as it is officially called—to “implement the job cuts as smoothly as possible”.

The *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* reports on an internal Daimler letter, which calls on executives to “make the separation intentions unmistakably clear and leave no room for negotiations.” Exit interviews should be completed within 15 minutes, at the latest within 30 minutes, the company writes.

In special training sessions, Daimler managers are being prepared for the possible reactions of those employees affected. In the past, management had demagogically invoked the “Daimler family” at works meetings, declaring “We are all Daimler.” Now, its management cadre is being trained to implement mass dismissals in an ice-cold manner.

Any kind of sympathy, pity or solidarity is to be suppressed from the outset. The *Stuttgarter Nachrichten* quote from the letter, which provides the supporting argumentation and prepares executives for dramatic scenes. As examples, objections are listed, such as: “My wife/husband is seriously ill,” “You have always had it in for me.” “Now I am supposed to take the blame for what the management has screwed up” and “Are you crazy? Right now? In these uncertain times?”

As a precautionary measure, the company has also announced layoffs in management, so every manager knows that only those who are prepared to implement job cuts with all their rigour and brutality will keep their positions.

Daimler had the “guidelines” for the exit interviews drawn up by the Düsseldorf-based personnel consultancy Von Rundstedt & Partner, which specializes in this type of consulting for mass dismissals.

Exit interviews should be conducted in person and not via online means, they stipulate. At the beginning, the necessity and inevitability of job cuts should be discussed. “The situation is very critical throughout the company,” is one of the talking points. The coronavirus crisis is hitting Daimler in a phase “in which we are facing economic challenges anyway,” writes Chairman of the Board Ola Källenius in the introduction to the preparatory seminars.

Those who are being “screened out” should be prevented from applying for other positions in the company. The guidelines recommend the following wording for this: “I therefore recommend that you concentrate your search on a new position outside the company.” Or, “Before a decision was made on the separation, we checked out possibilities to employ you further. Unfortunately, the situation throughout the company is extremely critical right now.”

According to the guide, managers must refrain from small talk and pronounce the bad news in the first three sentences, choosing clear words such as “termination” or “separation.”

If in the exit interview the employee says that his or her existence is threatened, the manager should answer, “That is why we would like to assure you with a severance payment for a transitional period and support you in your search for a new job.”

The guidelines also advise managers to have “individual, well-considered reasons” prepared—this is “a key factor for the success of the interview.” Possible reasons could be that the employee’s skills “do not meet future requirements.” “Low performance” is also allowed as an argument, but “only if documented”!

In theory, an employee can also refuse to sign a

termination agreement. In this case, the guide recommends hidden threats. For example, in that case, “everything could change for you. Then you would have to see in the future how to deal with this uncertainty in your professional life.”

This threat of bullying is not unfounded, writes *Manager Magazin*. During earlier waves of layoffs, stubborn employees were often placed in individual offices and were not given any more work to do. Many had to fight in court for their right to work.

A statement by the works council declares such a threatening scenario to be unacceptable. The head of the general works council, Michael Brecht, complains that the internal training paper contradicts the company’s “social partnership responsibility” and was commissioned behind the works council’s back.

This is just a cover story. For many years, Daimler management, and all other major car plants, have not taken a single decision regarding employees without first discussing it in detail with the works council, the IG Metall union and the employee representatives on the company’s supervisory board. As a rule, the union and the works council draw up the dismissal plans themselves and propose them to the management. Even protest actions, which are then often organised by the union representatives, are agreed in advance with management.

The IG Metall and the works council have expressly supported all rationalisation measures. Cost reductions, increased competitiveness, building synergy, optimisation and efficiency increases are the terms with which works councils have been justifying cuts and job losses for years to maximise profits.

Since the announcement of 10,000 redundancies last autumn, the anger of the workers about the collaboration of the IG Metall with management has been growing rapidly. In January, works council leader Brecht warned management, “We have a mood between anger and disappointment in the workforce. People want orientation and clarity.”

He called for a “clear forward strategy” to maximise profits and increase the dividend for investors and assured management that the IG Metall would cooperate fully. He said it was “now the task of the board of directors to make the corporate strategy more visible.”

This is exactly what is happening now. The company strategy is to use the exceptional situation created by the coronavirus crisis to implement all of its rationalisation plans at top speed.

While on the one hand, production is being ramped up

again despite the renewed rise in infection figures, and employees are being forced to risk their health and lives, on the other hand, job cuts are being accelerated.

Daimler and all other car companies are reorganizing production at the expense of the workforce and are prepared to walk over dead bodies. Corporate management knows only one goal: profit and economic dominance of the world market. It is using the coronavirus crisis to be at the forefront of the global race for sales markets and dominance.

Works council Chairman Brecht also supports this. At the end of January, he warned against Chinese competition. He told finance daily *Handelsblatt* at the time, “We are making ourselves dangerously dependent upon manufacturers in China and Korea. CATL or LG Chem [leading Chinese and South Korean battery manufacturers] form powerful oligopolies; they can control the availability and prices of the [battery] cells.”

Brecht demanded, “We must ensure that the oligopolies do not abuse their power. European policy must help European companies stay in control.” “We” should encourage cell manufacturers to build plants in Europe.

The whole interview was a nationalist attack on Asian workers and a call to the German government and the European Union for trade war and protectionism.

It could hardly be clearer that the IG Metall and the works council stand unreservedly on the side of management and the German government.

It is time to oppose this reactionary nationalist policy. Workers at Daimler and all other car plants must free themselves from the straitjacket of the trade unions and form independent action committees. It is necessary to combine the struggle against the re-start of production with the struggle against dismissals and to organise joint resistance.

This requires an international socialist perspective. May Day is a good opportunity to begin this work. The International Committee of the Fourth International, and all its sister Socialist Equality Parties, is organising a worldwide online event May 2. This is an important step in the preparation for the great class struggles that are now beginning.



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