

# Union supports ditching temporary workers at Meyer shipyard in Germany

Marianne Arens  
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The Meyer shipyard is in crisis due to the coronavirus pandemic and has already threatened mass layoffs. The shipyard builds cruise and luxury ships, including for the Aida shipping company. The yard was able to deliver three such ocean liners last year. Due to the pandemic, numerous cruise ships are now stranded in ports worldwide. All cruises have been canceled and the future is totally uncertain due to the high risk of infection on these ships.

Senior manager Bernhard Meyer and his sons see the crisis as an opportunity to implement large-scale restructuring. They run the shipyard, which celebrated its 225th anniversary in January, as a “family business.” Five years ago, they moved the company’s legal seat to Luxembourg, with the aim of not only saving taxes, but also preventing workers representatives from sitting on the company supervisory board—the form of “social partnership” which is the rule for German-based companies.

The IG Metall and the Left Party in Lower Saxony criticised the move, declaring that in the middle of the coronavirus crisis the shipyard had to “take social partnership seriously,” in the words of IG Metall representative Thomas Gelder. In the state parliament the Left Party declared that if the shipyard wanted to claim state funding it would have to “return to Germany.”

The shipyard management has already applied to the SPD-CDU-led state government of Lower Saxony for high amounts of state aid to offset losses brought from the corona pandemic. At the same time, executives have announced proposals for a program of rigorous cost-cutting at the shipyard, with 1.2 billion euros to be saved in the coming years. Short-time working has existed since the beginning of May, and the Damocles sword of mass layoffs remains.

In this situation, IG Metall has undertaken to undermine workers’ resistance and is enforcing every measure necessary to ensure the company’s economic competitiveness. As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The coronavirus crisis, however, has hugely intensified the tendency towards corporatism—i.e., the fusion of entrepreneurs, unions and government.”

In the case of the Meyer shipyard, IG Metall is conducting a blatant manoeuvre of dividing the workforce. The works council and union are demanding the yard sack thousands of short term and agency workers in order to preserve the jobs of the full-time workforce in Papenburg. There are around 3,500 full-time workers at the shipyard, as well as almost 3,000 short term and agency workers, most of whom come from Eastern Europe.

“One cannot tolerate new outside contractors coming to the shipyard during this time,” Bloem, chairman of the works council, told the newspaper *Die Welt*. On the IG Metall web site, Bloem declared: “Regular employees with their many years of experience are responsible for the success of the shipyard. Instead of layoffs, it is therefore a question of short-time work with qualifications and the reduction of external capacities (agency and work contracts). This is how to build a bridge to the future.”

This vile attempt to incite the permanent workforce against agency and contract workers must be decisively rejected by all workers! It only confirms that the unions and works councils act as an extended arm of the management. Workers in the pandemic can only defend their jobs and lives if they break with these nationalist, pro-capitalist union bureaucrats and unite in independent action committees based on socialist policies.

*All sections* of workers are under extreme pressure

during the corona pandemic. They build cruise ships at the shipyard for dream trips to the fjords or the Caribbean, although their working conditions are often nightmarish. Even though there were cases of coronavirus at the shipyard, work continued under difficult conditions: the canteen was closed, coffee machines turned off and changing rooms locked. Workers attending their shifts in their working gear have had to work six hours without a break.

As for the agency and short-term contract workers, they face even worse forms of exploitation. They work for much less salary than regularly employed shipyard workers. The profits are made by agencies and subcontractors that employ them. These companies take the lion's share of wages and leave only a fraction for the workers they employ, who are forced to live in crowded and inadequate accommodation and pay their own transport costs.

IG Metall has no interest and no intention of assisting these workers. In this respect nothing has changed since the incident a few years ago, when two Romanian foreign workers from the Meyer shipyard died in a fire in a mass accommodation in Papenburg. All of the demands and promises of the time turned out to be empty words. The fact that all of the unions organised in the German Federation of Unions (DGB) tolerate and support such employment relationships shows the unions' true attitude towards all workers.

The coronavirus pandemic did not create these conditions, it has only made them public. In slaughterhouses, construction sites, parcel distribution centres, public transport, and in the auto industry, it is the working class who confront the difficulties and dangers posed by the corona crisis. For their part, the unions are on the side of those who rake in billions in aid and keep the German stock market buoyant. The union bigwigs on the supervisory and co-determination bodies of German companies benefit directly from this cronyism.

The close relationship between the union and the company at Meyer found striking expression this week when it was revealed that more than 30 members of the works council and company executive are now in quarantine, including the works council chairman Nico Bloem, after several meetings between the works council and company managers at which the head of personnel for the shipyard in Papenburg was present.

This official had attended a private party at a restaurant in the German region of East Frisia, near the Dutch border, after which a total of 217 people have been sent into quarantine and tested. According to figures issued late on Thursday, May 28, 34 people were tested positive for COVID-19 as a result of visiting the restaurant.

The outbreak was apparently the result of a celebration of the reopening of the "Alte Scheune" restaurant, which is located in Moormerland, near the Ems estuary in the North Sea. It was not a matter of simply taking a meal in a restaurant, but a large-scale event. A district administrator told NDR news channel that "coronavirus rules may have been violated." Guests greeted each other with a handshake, did not keep the proscribed minimum distance and wore no face masks.

When the head of personnel met with the works council subsequently, distance regulations were respected, but those taking part did not wear face masks, so the infection spread. The works councilors at Meyer and the IG Metall union do not usually parade themselves in public as best friends of the shipyard management. But the infection spread from management to union because they are, in fact, in the closest contact.



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