Germany’s IG Metall union organizes job cuts at Thyssenkrupp-Stahl

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Germany’s IG Metall union and its works council representatives are helping to force thousands of workers out of their jobs at the steelmaker Thyssenkrupp-Stahl. To this end, they are conducting numerous individual talks with steelworkers whose jobs the company wants to shed. Older steelworkers from Duisburg have told the *World Socialist Web Site* about the enormous pressure the works council representatives are putting on them.

This is how the IG Metall (IGM) and the works council are pushing ahead with the break-up of the company, under an agreement they reached at the end of May with the owners on the Thyssenkrupp AG Supervisory Board. The corporation’s steel operations are to be merged with another steel group or sold off completely. To drive the company’s share price, the IGM’s works council representatives are working hard to cut 3,000 jobs, as agreed between the union and the company in March.

The joint plan provided for 1,000 employees to leave the company by the beginning of August with severance pay or via a so-called “transfer company.” So far, however, only just over 300 steelworkers have agreed to leave. Given 34,000 unemployed (13 percent) and 50,000 working part time in Duisburg alone, as well as the unforeseeable consequences of the coronavirus crisis, many fear they will never get another job.

On September 1, the so-called “Volunteer Programme” once again came into force. Under this measure, workers receive “transfer payments” for 19 months, amounting to a total of 85 percent of their last net wage. The Federal Employment Agency pays 60 or 67 percent (if children live in the household) of this amount, with the company covering the rest.

Anyone who accepts the transfer payments would subsequently receive only an extremely low severance payment of 20 percent of their monthly gross salary for each year of employment. Severance pay of 50 percent of the last gross monthly salary per year of employment, as recognized by every labour court, would only be paid to employees who left their jobs without joining the transfer company. It is also limited to those born in 1964 or later, i.e., employees under the age of 56.

Older employees, those over 60, are not covered by these regulations. Since it was mainly younger employees who left their jobs via various social plans during the continuous job cuts of recent years, there are still around 4,000 workers over 60 in Duisburg alone, almost one in three.

Since they are no longer covered by the partial retirement scheme, they are now gradually being called into the human resources department for personnel interviews. Company representatives and IG Metall works council members then exert pressure on those who are old, often ill, and no longer able to deliver the necessary performance. One works council member told a 63-year-old steelworker he was “no longer acceptable” to the company.

As these older workers are about to retire anyway, they are to be thrown out of the company with a symbolic severance payment of €6,000 to €9,000. The latter allegedly tops up their unemployment benefit to 85 percent of their last net salary until they retire.

Some workers told the WSWS how they had been called and invited to personnel discussions during their vacation. In other cases, works council members had even visited older workers at home and urged them to sign a termination agreement. Many signed, “to finally draw a line in the sand.”

It is all, “To get rid of superfluous workers at the

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cheapest cost and to the detriment of the workers," one angrily told the WSWS. "If you're not interested [in accepting], they put you under pressure."

Another reported that if you do not accept three offers, you are threatened with dismissal for operational reasons. The IGM works council representatives argued, among other things, that older workers took away the jobs of their younger colleagues since the jobs would be cut—one way or another.

While workers face having the thumbscrews put on them as they are pressed to resign using all means, Duisburg works council representative Peter Trube will continue to pocket money from the company beyond his regular retirement age. Trube, who was released from his job at Hamborn Beeck to carry out full-time works council duties, should retire in November, then receiving just his regular retirement pension. But now, his employment contract has been extended until the next works council election in April 2022. His colleague, 67-year-old outgoing works council member Helmut Schuckardt, is being given a "consultant contract" as a pensioner until the end of the year.

Such IGM functionaries, who act within Germany's legal framework of "co-determination," openly enforce the attacks on workers to such an extent that they can easily and without any inhibitions switch over to management's camp. Especially in the steel industry, this is now a common practice. For example, former IG Metall secretary and deputy chairman of the Thyssenkrupp supervisory board, Markus Grolms, has been personnel director at Thyssenkrupp-Stahl since April of this year. On the Executive Board, he is responsible for job cuts and works closely with his former colleagues in the IG Metall and the works council.

As early as May 2019, i.e., while still an IGM secretary, Grolms had declared that "the restructuring of Thyssenkrupp is unfortunately unavoidable." This would be "a difficult, but unfortunately necessary path for the company and the employees." The employees were "willing to endure pain for it," said Grolms, who is now an income millionaire. Now steelworkers are experiencing first-hand what Grolms meant by this.

The IGM functionaries and their works council members carry out the company's dismissal and downsizing plans not simply because they are corrupt—even if many of them are. The deeper reason is their unconditional defence of the capitalist profit system, from which they make a good living as well-paid functionaries. Like the management and shareholders, they believe that jobs, wages, and social achievements can only be maintained if the corporation generates high revenues and profits.

After the Second World War, when the German economy grew rapidly, they were able to provide workers with some crumbs from the companies on this basis. This came to an end with the increased globalization of production in the 1980s and the intensification of economic competition.

The unions reacted to this with economic nationalism and their transformation into direct agencies of the corporations. They defend the competitiveness of "their" companies by attacking the workforce. Company restructuring plans are worked out in the think tanks of the trade union-owned Hans Böckler Foundation, concretized in the executive boardrooms of the trade unions and enforced by the host of works council representatives inside the companies.

The defence of jobs, wages and other gains won by the working class can only be successful if it is organised in opposition to the logic and constraints of the market economy. It must be anti-capitalist, that is, socialist. It is not the profits of companies that are decisive for the organization of the economy, but the interests and needs of the workforce, their families and society.

Workers stand in open conflict with the trade unions. They must join together in new action committees that are politically and organizationally independent of the unions and fight for an anti-capitalist, socialist response to the current attacks.

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