Build an independent action committee to defend jobs and wages!

Union suppresses criticism of job cuts at German steel producer ThyssenKrupp

Dietmar Gaisenkersting
19 September 2020

German steel and metal engineering companies are announcing fresh waves of mass redundancies on a virtually daily basis. Just last week, truck manufacturer MAN, a subsidiary of the VW group, announced the elimination of 9,500 jobs out of the company's global total of 36,000.

Major corporations, banks and hedge funds are using the pandemic to launch attacks on wages and jobs worked out long before the coronavirus crisis. The German DAX index has increased in value 10 times during the past 30 years and a tiny elite have become immeasurably rich as a result. There are now over 100 billionaires in Germany and 23,000 individuals earn more than €1 million per year.

This orgy of new wealth can only continue at the cost of massive cuts to the standard of living of the working class. This is the reason for the mass layoffs, wage cuts and intensification of labour exploitation taking place not only in Germany, but all over the world.

The only answer is a united offensive by the international working class to put a stop to this orgy of enrichment, guided by the perspective of fundamentally reorganising society to meet the needs of the broad masses of the population. The fight against job losses must not be made dependent on whether a particular company makes a profit or a loss—the latter is often the result of billions of dollars in dividends handed out to shareholders and hedge funds. It must be guided by the principle of defending every job, linked to a socialist offensive.

The most hostile opponents of workers in this regard are the IG Metall union and its works councils. The policies of "social partnership" and "codetermination," which have been legally and institutionally anchored in Germany more than in any other country, have long since mutated into an open alliance between union officials and the corporations against workers.

The trade union secretaries and heads of the works councils, who often earn several times more than an ordinary worker, share the same vision as company managers, i.e., defence of the "competitiveness" of one factory against all others. Within the framework of co-determination, the union bureaucrats develop restructuring plans and rigorously impose them against company employees. Those who resist are either bought off, intimidated or driven out of the company.

ThyssenKrupp is a good example. In March, the executive of the concern and IG Metall agreed to cut 3,000 jobs in order to facilitate the sale or merger of the company's steel operations.

On September 2, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported on the manner in which the company's human resource department and works councils were putting pressure on older workers in particular to quit the company in return for a meagre severance payout. The report was based on conversations with a number of workers. Their names were not disclosed to protect them from reprisals.

The article also addressed the close interrelationship between the union and the company's board of directors. For example, the labour director of Thyssenkrupp, Markus Grolms, who is responsible for the planned dismissals, was an IG Metall union secretary until April this year.

The article obviously struck a nerve and sent shock waves through the company. The article spread rapidly on WhatsApp and was read several thousand times, with many workers confirming what it said about the

© World Socialist Web Site

role of the works council and IG Metall. As one worker wrote to the WSWS: “It was like this before, but it wasn’t really publicised. The unions are stuffing their pockets full. The works councils and trade unions have thousands of jobs on their conscience.”

On Facebook, where IG Metall officials have easy access, workers were more reticent. For their part, IGM representatives were outraged, including Fred Wans, who ran for the works council election in 2014 with an opposition list and was subsequently expelled from the IGM. The WSWS had reported on the case several times.

Now Wans, however, is openly defending his IGM colleagues on the works council against criticism from workers. “All [!] my colleagues on the works council supervising employees’ invitation to a social plan meeting, are doing an excellent job,” he wrote in a Facebook post. He described reports by workers of being pressured by the works councils as “slanderous.”

He then requested that the author of the WSWS article name informants. When the latter refused to do so, Wans excluded him from his Facebook group and also threatened to take legal action.

Wans knows, of course, that the WSWS never makes unjustified claims, that it thoroughly checks its information and protects its sources and would never hand them over to IG Metall and its works councils. As early as 2015, when he was still in conflict with the IGM, the IGM had put pressure on the opposition works councils to reveal the WSWS informants. Now Wans is doing the same.

How is this about-turn to be explained?

We don’t know Wans’ personal motives or what has been going on behind the scenes. But politically his development does not come as a surprise. Although he opposed the IG Metall and the wage cuts agreed to at the plant by the union, he never broke with the latter’s narrow, nationalist perspective.

As early as the spring of 2015, the WSWS had warned: “Restricting oneself to minimal trade union demands cannot solve the fundamental problems of the workforce and has an invariable logic. It leads to subordination to so-called operational and economic constraints and turns the opposition works councils of today into the corrupt social partners of tomorrow.”

We asked: “What if the global steel market collapses due to the ongoing global economic crisis and the board of directors or a financial investor like Cevian Capital demands the destruction of the steel location in Duisburg? Will the opposition in the works council then demand that the site be prevented from being dismantled through wage cuts and job losses in order to ‘save the site’? Will they seek to make the demolition of the site ‘socially acceptable’?”

This is exactly what has now happened. In 2014, Wans called his opposition list “Interest Group 35-hour week” because it was directed against the wage cuts agreed by the IGM via reduced working hours. Wans himself now supports a reduction of working hours with the deceptive argument that this would secure the site.

The experiences at Thyssen-Krupp underline that the defence of jobs, income and social rights requires a complete break with the unions and their “social partnership” perspective. What is needed is the establishment of action committees organised independently of the unions to defend jobs, wages and working conditions, linking up with workers in other companies in Germany and abroad.

The author of this article invites the workers of Thyssenkrupp to join his Facebook group to discuss this perspective and build an action committee. In order to conduct the discussion openly, IG-Metall functionaries and their works councils have no access.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site