

Massive coronavirus outbreak at Airbus plant in Hamburg, Germany

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The Airbus plant in Hamburg has become a coronavirus hotspot. A total of 21 workers at the aircraft manufacturer have been infected with COVID-19. As a result, 500 workers on an entire shift have been sent into quarantine. The outbreak at Airbus shows once again that workers are completely on their own when it comes to the high health risks to which they are exposed. The company, the authorities and the trade unions and their works council representatives owe their allegiance to the bank accounts of the shareholders rather than the lives and health of the workforce.

Around 12,000 people work at Airbus in Hamburg. There was no press release announcing the infection and quarantine of an entire shift at the Hanseatic city's largest employer, neither from the company nor the IG Metall union, which dominates the works council, nor by the Hamburg health authorities. It was only after the tabloid *Bild* reported the incident that the Hamburg health authority and Airbus Group felt compelled to confirm the outbreak to the *Deutsche Presseagentur* (dpa).

The origin of the cases is still under investigation, Airbus told dpa. The employees had been working in two neighbouring halls and using common break rooms, where the virus was believed to have spread. Whether it was a highly contagious strain of the virus that has greater and more dangerous effects in the workforce, the health authority would not be able to say until the middle of the week at the earliest, it said.

In the meantime, thousands of workers continue to be sent to work, although the dangers cannot be assessed. This applies to all 27 Airbus sites in Germany alone.

The Airbus works council in Hamburg, led by Sophia Kielhorn, has explicitly supported this. In the IG Metall shop stewards' Facebook group, she rejected any

responsibility. "We live in capitalism," she wrote to justify her support for the top management. "Capital calls the shots there, and the workers' representatives can only mitigate and balance things out."

She was supported by other trade union representatives. Marcus Baitis from the shop stewards committee at Premium Aerotec, a supplier and part of Airbus SE, said that the works council and "even the shop stewards" had no legal basis "to force the employer to close the plant."

The strategic adviser for the works councils, Peter Müller, agreed and warned of damages and fines if the union called a strike. This, he said, was "playing with people's livelihoods."

What a distortion of the facts! Since the beginning of the pandemic, the corporations have been playing with the livelihoods—and the lives—of their workers and their families. In Germany alone, over 50,000 people have fallen victim to the pandemic—over two million worldwide—and there is no end in sight. On the contrary, due to the mutations of the virus with even more dangerous contagion potential, an increase in the number of infections and deaths is to be feared.

The self-imposed impotence of the trade unions comes from the fact that they have devoted themselves body and soul to the corporations and their shareholders. No matter how high the price paid by working people with their health and lives, the economy must keep running.

IG Metall Chairman Jörg Hofmann recently stated in the *Augsburger Allgemeine* that the facts "do not support shutting down the industry to reduce the number of coronavirus infections. ... Shutting down the industry would have the most severe economic consequences." It was impossible to imagine what would happen "if Airbus were to shut down production

for months or work only one shift throughout,” wrote Kielhorn, head of the works council.

The health and lives of the 12,000-strong Airbus workforce are being permanently subordinated to corporate profits. This also applies to jobs. At the end of June last year, Airbus took advantage of the pandemic and announced it would be eliminating 15,000 of its 135,000 jobs worldwide, including 5,100 in Germany.

The majority, 3,200 jobs in production, administration and other areas, will be in northern Germany. In the plants in Hamburg-Finkenwerder, Buxtehude and Fuhlsbüttel, more than 2,300 jobs are to fall victim to the cuts—almost one in six jobs there. The coronavirus-related slump in orders is expected to cost over 400 jobs in Bremen, around 360 in Stade and 40 at other locations.

As in the question of working despite the dangers of the pandemic, the union and its works council representatives do not see their task as defending jobs. It is the employer that decides on the jobs and thus the livelihoods of the workers and their families, according to the profit interests of the owners and shareholders. The works council regards itself as an accomplice and henchman, who has no choice but to “cushion the cuts in a socially acceptable way,” as Kielhorn would put it.

As everywhere, Airbus management and the works council have agreed on the now-familiar cuts implementation mechanisms. The company says it will refrain from compulsory redundancies until the end of March. Until then, older employees aged 58 and over, in particular, are being urged to give up their jobs and accept severance payments. Airbus is planning a so-called “transfer company” in which employees can supposedly be retrained or gain further qualifications—before usually being forced into unemployment.

If not enough workers decide to leave “voluntarily,” the company is threatening compulsory redundancies starting in April.

The coronavirus outbreak at the Hamburg-Finkenwerder plant and the loss of one in six jobs make clear how urgent it is for workers to organise independently into action committees to take the defence of their health, lives and jobs into their own hands.

The first thing to do is to inform workers in all the

other plants and demand they receive immediate and comprehensive information about the coronavirus crisis in their workplaces. The continuing refusal to provide information and the conspiracy of the management, the works council and the trade union can no longer be accepted.

If such a massive coronavirus outbreak can occur in the Hamburg-Finkenwerder plant, which has always praised its high safety standards and its “comprehensive hygiene concept,” then this means it can take place in any plant and is already developing everywhere.

It is necessary to confront the capitalist profit logic. This requires a socialist perspective that places the defence of the health and living conditions of workers and their families higher than the enrichment of management, business associations and investors. This is what the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) is fighting for.

We call on all workers who are no longer prepared to accept the high risk of infection in the factories, the systematic coverup of infection figures and the continuation of production despite the dramatic spread of the pandemic: Get in touch with us. The struggle to protect health and lives must be linked to the rejection of the attacks on jobs, wages, pensions and working conditions.



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