

German metalworkers strike against wage cuts and unsafe working conditions

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Tens of thousands of workers in the German auto, metal and electrical industries took part in short-term “warning strikes” on Tuesday and Wednesday after employers’ representatives refused to make any wage concessions despite raking in billions in profits this year. The current negotiations are the third round of talks and affect a total of 3.9 million workers.

According to Germany’s corporatist labour law, workers are not allowed to strike in between the periods of contract bargaining, but the deadline in the latest dispute expired on March 2, which means that workers can now take industrial action.

The anger on the part of workers is enormous. The *Wolfsburger Allgemeine* described the mood when Volkswagen workers on a night shift stopped work an hour early and assembled in front of the factory gates.

According to the paper, “Along with frustration and anger, however, another emotion was clearly felt on Tuesday: fighting spirit. Many workers raised their fists as they left the factory and made clear their joy at the fact that industrial action was finally starting. ‘The hall is completely empty, everyone is joining in,’ said one worker from component production in hall 6.”

Across Lower Saxony and Saxony-Anhalt, more than 22,000 workers took action on Tuesday alone. In many other federal states such as Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate, Thuringia and Saarland, workers at 68 factories also went on strike, with 14,500 workers participating. In Baden-Württemberg, 6,500 workers went on strike and several hundred demonstrated in front of the car supplier Mahle Behr in Stuttgart.

In Bavaria, 9,000 workers from 24 factories briefly stopped work. In the city of Schweinfurt 4,160 workers from a range of companies—ZF, SKF, Schaeffler, Bosch Rexroth, ZF Aftermarket and ZF Race Engineering—took part in warning strikes during normal

and night shifts. In North Rhine-Westphalia, more than 3,800 workers stopped work for a short time with another 2,600 in the north and coastal regions.

Workers are angry after having been forced to work under utterly unsafe conditions for many months, putting themselves and their families at enormous risk every day. Large-scale outbreaks have already occurred in hundreds of factories but have been largely played down and concealed.

Following a real loss of wages in 2018 and 2019, the same group of workers experienced stagnant wages in 2020. In the course of a year when companies were able to perversely rake in huge profits at the expense of the health of their workforce, the latter underwent a massive decline in purchasing power.

In the past few days, a number of German auto companies have proudly announced billions in profits made during the 2020 pandemic year. Daimler alone achieved a fabulous profit increase of 50 percent over the previous year, notching up \$6 billion euros. BMW also recorded huge profits in the midst of the pandemic—€1.8 billion in the third quarter of 2020 alone. The company’s annual profit has yet to be published.

Volkswagen, however, has overtaken all of its main German rivals and reported €8.8 billion net profit after tax last week. Its subsidiary Porsche, described as the company’s “profit machine,” made €2.6 billion net profit. At the same time, the Porsche executive announced its intention to increase its planned cuts programme from €6 billion to €10 billion.

Along with the auto companies and their suppliers, other major German companies, such as Siemens, are taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to initiate long-planned cost-cutting measures, involving job cuts and the closure of entire plants. Tens of thousands of

jobs have already been irrevocably wiped out.

The obscene dividends for major companies are a direct result of the billions handed out by the German government to the banks and corporations in so-called Corona aid. The key role in maximising profits, however, has been played by the IG Metall trade union. Mobilising its network of works councils and its army of shop stewards, the union has guaranteed the continuation of non-essential production in completely unprotected workplaces.

At the same time, the union pushed through an “emergency contract” at the beginning of the pandemic, which stipulated no increase in wages and banned workers from taking any strike action against this wage cut and unsafe working conditions. Based on this policy, IG Metall was able to make possible the huge returns for the companies at the expense of workers’ jobs, living standards and health.

In the current round of contract bargaining, the union is only demanding a paltry four percent wage increase. When it agreed to the last contract three years ago, the union started negotiations with a demand for six percent. Behind the scenes, IG Metall has long since agreed with the companies on a further deterioration of wage levels.

The warning strikes are characterised by an obvious contradiction. While there is broad anger and willingness to strike among the workers, IG Metall is doing everything it can to prevent any genuine industrial action and a widespread mobilisation of the working class.

The union’s usual ritual of protests where workers blow their whistles but are not allowed to open their mouths are aimed merely at releasing pressure and demoralising workers prior to the inevitable sellout. Because whistling with an anti-coronavirus mask is difficult, the union has even developed a “whistle app” designed to perpetuate the mindless noise at protest rallies.

Auto, metal and electrical workers must firmly reject the trap being set by the unions and companies and withdraw any negotiating mandate from IG Metall. Instead, they must form independent action committees in the factories and take the strike into their own hands. Such committees must immediately make contact with workers in other countries and other sections of the working class, such as the hunger strikers at WISAG in

Frankfurt.

The strike in the metal and electrical industry must be made the starting point for a European-wide general strike, not only against wage cuts, but aimed at defending all jobs. Above all, it must enforce a lockdown of all non-essential industries and guarantee safe working conditions to bring the pandemic under control and save tens of thousands of lives. Affected workers must receive full wage compensation. The record profits of the corporations and major shareholders must be confiscated and reallocated to workers and their families.



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