

Workers at Continental in Hesse, Germany carry out 24-hour strike

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On April 15 workers at the Continental Auto plant in Karben, Hesse carried out a 24-hour strike to protest against the decision to close the factory by 2023.

Continental intends to wipe out 30,000 jobs worldwide and close a series of factories. The plan was decided by the corporation's executive at the beginning of September 2020 in order to save €1 billion by 2023. The German engineering union IG Metall, which has known about the plans for more than a year, is focusing protest actions at individual plants in order to isolate workers and prevent a joint struggle by all Conti employees.

Along with the Karben plant in Hesse, where 1,088 workers produce car components, Conti factories in Babenhausen, Hesse (2,570 jobs), Roding in the Upper Palatinate (520 jobs) and Conti-Vitesco in Nuremberg (almost 500 jobs) are also to be closed. The planned cutbacks, however, go far beyond this list and affect around 13,000, or one in four jobs in Germany alone.

Many of those losing their jobs have been with the company for decades, like Ms. Weber. She told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "We found out about the closure on April 9. That was the day I celebrated my 35th anniversary at the company. On the same day, new apprentices started work, only to learn at noon that the factory was closing."

Ms. Weber confirmed that the workforce had suffered wage cuts for the past 11 years, all in order to keep the factory open and save jobs. "And then you get a blow like this!" She reported that she trained at the VDO works in Frankfurt-Heddernheim and worked in Bockenheim, before joining Continental in Karben when the company was taken over. She enjoyed her work and does not think she can find anything else comparable. Also she drew attention to the temporary contract workers—around 200 are employed in the factory—who are likely to be the first to be made redundant.

To prevent the risk of coronavirus arising from large gatherings, workers had been told to stay home and only a handful of strikers manned the strike post at the factory gate. They were mainly members of the works council and IG Metall, seeking to demonstrate "that we are capable of

striking." An indefinite strike has also been planned.

The entire auto and related supplier industry is facing a huge upheaval. Auto companies are converting production to electric mobility and using the pandemic as an excuse to implement long-planned strategies for rationalisation. Production is being relocated and concentrated, and tens of thousands of previously well-paid jobs are being wiped out. Production in Karben will probably be undertaken in the future in Eastern Europe, Romania, Lithuania or the Czech Republic, where workers are exploited under much worse conditions than those currently prevailing in Germany.

With 230,000 employees, Continental is the world's second largest supplier to the car industry. The corporation, with a 150-year long history, has long since developed from a rubber tyre manufacturer in Lower Saxony into a globally active supplier producing components for auto, rail and air transport. During the Nazi era, the company employed tens of thousands of forced labourers and was an indispensable part of the Nazi armaments and war industry.

Today, Continental's largest shareholder, with 46 percent, is the Schaeffler family, the country's sixth wealthiest company and one of the world's super-richest. The Continental corporation, which is currently laying off 30,000 workers, paid out €600 million in dividends to its shareholders as recently as last summer, despite the coronavirus crisis.

Ten years ago there was already a big wave of layoffs and plant closures at Continental. At the time, Schaeffler had just taken over Continental, which was three times its size, when the international stock market collapsed. In order to meet the banks' demands, workers were subjected to a brutal austerity programme. Many plants were closed, including a tyre factory in Clairoux, France and the truck tyre plant in Hanover-Stöcken.

The French workers occupied the factory in northern France and contacted their German colleagues in Saargemünd and Hanover. When workers from Clairoux and Lower Saxony demonstrated together with those in Hanover on April 24, 2009, the company executive reacted with

alarm. In order to nip any effective international industrial action in the bud, the management quickly offered workers relatively high severance payments.

They then recovered this outlay through wage concessions agreed to by the IG Metall and IG BCE. At Schaeffler, with the help of the trade unions, a wage cut of 17 percent was imposed, which the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and the Left Party also supported. Workers at Continental have now undergone wage cuts for the past 12 years now, as Ms. Weber and the Karben works councils confirmed. Nevertheless, the plant is still being closed.

It is clear that workers can only defend themselves against these attacks by organising together internationally in the various Conti factories and across national borders. This is the policy of the Socialist Equality Party and its affiliated parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International. We propose that workers form action committees that can act completely independently of the IG Metall, IG BCE and all of the trade unions.

Earlier this year, the SGP launched the Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces. The appeal for action stated: “We created the network because we are no longer prepared to accept the mass redundancies planned for industry, dangerous working conditions and the cover-up of the infection figures in the factories. We are striving to organise the growing resistance independently of Bundestag parties and trade unions and coordinate it internationally.”

For decades, the unions have repeatedly pressured the Conti workforce into making concessions and forcing them to give up the gains fought for in prior contract struggles. The unions claimed that such concessions were necessary to secure jobs and factories. Now tens of thousands of jobs and entire plants are being surrendered without a fight.

IG Metall was involved in the planning of the mass layoffs and closures from the start. Its executive committee member Christiane Benner is deputy chair of the Conti supervisory board. The union has taken on the task of enforcing company policy in the factories, and the current protests are part of this. Instead of mobilising workers at all plants against the capitalists, the IG Metall is dividing the workforce on the basis of its long-standing “single location” policy.

In the media, union bosses complain that the company wants to relocate jobs to Eastern European low-wage countries “out of pure greed for profits.” In Karben the workers are being told: “We, the IG Metall, actually reject the closure outright. We are only negotiating a social contract in order to establish a legal basis for industrial action.”

In the end, however, the union’s signature will set the seal on the closure, coupled with its familiar methods of

pressuring workers to take early retirement, severance pay and a transfer into a subsidiary company, which in turn leads to unemployment after a few months.

IG Metall has just repeated these tactics at the nearby Continental plant in Babenhausen. The union declares it has secured a great victory because the factory will not close in 2025 as planned, but instead three years later, in 2028. Up until then, most of the 3,300 jobs at the factory will be phased out.

The agreed severance payments, ranging from €20,000 to a maximum of €190,000 gross, are based on years of service and the readiness of workers to sacrifice their jobs. Those who decide quickly are to receive a “turbo bonus” amounting to an additional three months’ salary. It was also agreed that this severance offer would only apply to IG Metall members. The fate of one-third of the workforce, who are not union members, will be decided by arbitration. Temporary and contract workers can expect nothing at all.

Since the announcement of this deal, angry comments from employees have been piling up on social media. One commentator said that the agreement reached by IG Metall was “a very small crumb from a mouldy cake.” Another described the deal as a “slap in the face” and a “ridiculous” offer.

The statement of the chairperson of the works council at the Babenhausen plant, Anne Nothing, following the agreement is significant. In her opinion it had “never been realistic” to save all jobs at the factory. This should give workers in Karben food for thought.



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