

Continental workers in Karben accept contract, but with many dissenting votes

Marianne Arens

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The so-called “social contract” has been accepted at Continental Karben in northern Hesse. However, the vote expresses the growing mistrust in the IG Metall union. Despite the relatively high average age in the company and a massive propaganda campaign by the union and the works council, there were remarkably many votes against it.

Only members of IG Metall and IG BCE were allowed to vote, just under 80 percent of the workforce, and of these, one in four abstained. Of the 75 percent who took part in the vote, 72.2 percent finally voted in favour. This means that in the end, only 45 percent of the entire workforce, not even half of all Continental employees at the Karben plant, voted yes.

Since last autumn, the workers have been fighting for the preservation of the plant and all jobs. After the 24-hour strike on April 15, an indefinite strike was prepared. A first “social contract” was rejected by the workforce. But the second draft agreed by the union also sealed the closure.

IG Metall told workers there was no alternative. According to IGM district leader Jörg Köhlinger, the contract contained the “opportunity for sustained site development.” Frank Grommeck (Left Party), chair of the works council, called together workers in small groups and put a gun to their heads: If they rejected it again, they would “stand empty-handed on the street.”

The contract itself is still being guarded like a state secret. Even workers who could vote on it were only able to see it in full on Monday, a few hours before the end of the vote.

In any case, it seals the closure of the plant in Karben by 2025 with the loss of 1,088 jobs. Only a small rump of 187 employees will continue to work for CES (Continental Engineering Services), while at Continental Automotive GmbH the layoffs will start at

the beginning of 2023. Older workers have been promised early retirement or partial retirement. Younger workers will be put in a “transfer company” before facing unemployment.

The closure agreement clearly shows which side the unions are on. They helped draw it up, so the plant shut down proceeds smoothly. They are not prepared to wage a fight to defend jobs, which would have sent a signal to other plants in the group and the whole auto and supplier industry.

The bourgeois press immediately recognised this. The pro-social democratic *Die Zeit* rejoiced: “The job cuts at the Continental plant in Karben, Hesse, can be carried out as agreed. The members of IG Metall agreed to the improved social collective agreement.”

This makes it clear—workers who want to defend their jobs must join together in action committees that are independent of the trade unions!

The Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces called on workers to vote No. It warned against IG Metall’s divisive manoeuvres that pit older workers against younger ones, union members against the unorganised and each plant against the others. “Above all, do not let yourselves be divided by location,” it said. “The union is letting each workforce fight on its own, which means they can only lose.”

The correctness of this warning can be seen every day, especially at Continental. Step by step, the cutbacks agreed are being enforced against the workers. In Bebra in northern Hesse, not far from Karben, IG Metall is preparing the next sell-out.

On Friday, the IG Metall called on the workers of Vitesco Technologies, also part of Continental, at the Bebra and Mühlhausen (Thuringia) sites to take part in a 24-hour warning strike. It is demanding a “social contract” for about 900 workers. The Vitesco plant in

Mühlhausen is to be closed and one in two jobs in Bebra destroyed.

With the help of IG Metall, 30,000 jobs are to be destroyed across the Continental group, 13,000 of them in Germany. The numerous closures and partial closures will also affect tyre production in Aachen (1,800 employees), brake production in Rheinböllen (650), the drive division Vitesco in Regensburg (2,100) and Nuremberg (250), the Continental plant in Babenhausen (2,500), as well as the above-mentioned sites in Bebra and Mühlheim and many more. Both the company board and IG Metall are keeping quiet about the attacks on jobs and sites in other European countries.

Continental wants to save one billion euros a year with these cutbacks and the company headquarters in Hanover and IG Metall are working hand in hand on this, for which the union officials are being paid handsomely. The second chairperson of IG Metall, Christiane Benner, received 269,000 euros last year as deputy chair of the Continental supervisory board. Furthermore, Hasan Allak (IG BCE), chair of the corporate works council, received 183,000 euros and Lorenz Pfau, chair of the central works council of Continental Automotive GmbH, 182,000 euros for his work on the supervisory board.

In Bebra, Mühlhausen and all other locations there is also only one way to take up the fight to defend jobs: Place no confidence in IG Metall and the trade unions! Workers face the same problems in all countries. They are confronted with the same big corporations and their stakeholders in the trade unions.

As the call of the action committees says: “If we unite and fight together, we are stronger than our opponents!” Continental workers who want to join this struggle should contact the Network of Action Committees for Safe Workplaces via the *World Socialist Web Site*.



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