

German construction industry union colludes with employers to drag out bargaining

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Last week, building industry employers in Germany prematurely broke off collective bargaining for some 890,000 workers in the main construction sector. Although the existing contract expires on June 30, the third round of negotiations will not take place before August.

The employers are sticking with their first offer, a total pay increase of 3 percent with a two-year contract, which they had already presented in May. It is an obvious provocation that aims to postpone discussion as far as possible into the autumn. The industry negotiators are the Saxony-based building contractor Uwe Nostitz, vice president of the Central Association of the German Construction Industry, and Jutta Beeke, managing director of the Echterhoff Bau Group in Osnabrück, for the Main Association of the German Construction Industry.

The IG BAU trade union is doing nothing to oppose the move. Union President Robert Feiger and chief negotiator Carsten Burckhardt merely complained about the ruthless behaviour of the employers saying, “They showed a complete lack of understanding; they were without any concept, they were without any plan.” This had never happened before. “They left the hall before our eyes.”

Without any resistance, the union is acquiescing to delaying tactics aimed at letting the main construction season pass and dragging out the dispute into the winter, if possible. After last week’s meeting of the federal bargaining commission, the union leaders said they wanted to go into arbitration as the next step. At the same time, Burckhardt stressed that the union was “ready for further talks; our door was and still is open.”

The union is demanding 5.3 percent more in wages and salaries, compensation for the often long commuting times to construction sites and the

alignment of incomes in the former East Germany with levels in the west of the country. These demands are at best a drop in the bucket.

The construction industry is one of the few sectors, which despite the coronavirus pandemic, has benefited from growth and was able to make high profits. Nevertheless, workers must slave until they drop and are constantly exposed to physical danger. The construction industry has a 48-hour workweek. Working hours go up to as high as 10 hours a day, and in the summer a six-day week is also possible, often with no overtime pay. As a result of the complex subcontractor arrangements, there is a lack of regulation on large construction sites, and workers are subject to arbitrary treatment.

They have worked through the entire pandemic, bearing the brunt of the construction boom and risking their health, safety and livelihoods. Over the course of just five days, from June 9 to 14, no less than three fatal accidents occurred in the German construction industry.

In early June, a 34-year-old laborer fell to his death in Karlsruhe. The man was working on the site of a new building for the KIT (Karlsruhe Institute of Technology). He was carrying weather stripping on the roof. It was around noon, and it was hot, when he suddenly fell 20 metres, succumbing to severe injuries at the scene of the accident. Although the cause of the accident has not yet been clarified, it was immediately claimed that there were “no indications of fault on the part of third parties.” However, the man was working alone on the roof in the midday heat without sufficient personal protective equipment.

Another terrible accident occurred three days later near Göttingen, when a crane fell over on a construction site in Esebeck. One construction worker from Southeastern Europe was killed instantly, and a

second was so badly injured that he had to be put into an artificial coma following emergency surgery. This took place on a Saturday, when normally no work should be done.

At that time, only workers from a subcontractor, which owns the crane, were working at the apartment building site. An expert has since determined that the crane was defective: a screw to secure it against overload had broken off or had been removed for some time. At the time of the accident, a weight of almost 2.2 tonnes was hanging from the crane, although it was approved for only 1.25 tonnes. The crane tilted and smashed through the ceiling of the building on which the two men had been working. Both fell into the depths and were buried under concrete parts.

The capitalists put profits before lives. To save time and money, workers are put under enormous pressure to labor under unsafe conditions. Construction equipment is jerry-rigged or not repaired, with deadly consequences.

Just two days later, another fatal accident occurred in Freiberg am Neckar in the Ludwigsburg district. A 49-year-old excavator operator fell into a construction pit and was crushed between the upended excavator and a wall. Several eyewitnesses immediately ran over, joining forces to raise the excavator a little and pulled the worker out from under it, but in vain. He died of his injuries in hospital.

In addition to the deadly conditions, time and again migrant workers from Eastern Europe are cheated out of their wages. When they complain, it turns out that the subsidiary or subcontractor is insolvent. Anger among workers is rising as a result.

In August 2018 in Buntingford, UK, Romanian excavator driver Daniel Neagu, who was sacked and cheated out of his wages, got in a digger and demolished five newly built terraced houses. They subsequently had to be rebuilt. A judge sentenced Neagu to four years in prison as a result.

The extreme exploitation and workers' growing anger highlights the importance of the perspective advanced by the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP). Workers must build action committees in the construction industry to take up a common struggle against the criminal methods of the building and subcontracting companies. In doing so, they must act independently of the trade unions and

above all the IG BAU.

The IG BAU emerged 23 years ago from its predecessor organisation Bau-Steine-Erden. Under Klaus WieseHügel, the union leader for 18 years, it developed into a kind of right-wing auxiliary police, attacking foreign migrant workers and stirring up racist sentiments in the name of the fight against moonlighting in construction.

Since then, the IG BAU has lost two-thirds of its 700,000 members. Today, it has only 247,000 members, even though it includes not only construction workers but also workers in building cleaning and waste collection, disposal and recycling (so-called "environmental management").

The IG BAU executive members all sit on the supervisory boards of large construction companies, for which they are well rewarded. Burckhardt is on the supervisory board of Hochtief AG together with his fellow union executive member Nicole Simons. Ulrike Laux, a member of the supervisory board of the WISAG holding company Aveco, currently shares responsibility for the dismissals of long-serving WISAG workers at Frankfurt Airport.



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