

Continental workers in Bebra and Mühlhausen, Germany vote for strike

Marianne Arens
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At Continental Automotive in Bebra (North Hesse) and Mühlhausen (Thuringia), almost 92 percent of the workforce at the automotive parts supplier voted for an indefinite strike on July 15 to defend jobs. Their willingness to fight is huge. “Ready to strike—we want to start and not wait for the executioner,” reads a poster in Mühlhausen.

However, instead of calling a strike, the IG Metall and IG BCE unions continued negotiations with management on Wednesday, July 21. “Against the background of recent, minor progress in negotiations,” wrote IGM district leader Jörg Köhlinger, “IG Metall is now giving the company one last chance at the negotiating table to avoid industrial action.” The union is “ready for a reasonable solution at the negotiating table,” IGM Secretary Dr. Matthias Ebenau also assured.

The works council representatives and union secretaries want to prevent a strike in defence of all jobs because they fear it could trigger a chain reaction. They agree with management and are pursuing the goal in Bebra and Mühlhausen of pushing through what they see as the “necessary” liquidation of almost 500 more jobs without it leading to a social uprising of the Conti workers.

The negotiations on a “social contract” are not to defend jobs but rather the way to push through the destruction of jobs against the declared resistance of the workers.

Significantly, Carola Rühl, chairperson of the works council of another Conti plant in Schwalbach/Taunus, wrote, “In Schwalbach, after tough wrangling, we finally succeeded in organising the inevitable job cuts in a socially acceptable way.” In Schwalbach, IG Metall agreed to the destruction of 220 jobs. Other examples of this “socially acceptable” (i.e., organised

by the union and the works council) job destruction are at the Aachen tyre plant (1,800 jobs), the Karben site (1,088 jobs), as well as at Babenhausen, where production will be closed by 2025, costing 2,570 jobs.

Workers at all these sites are ready to fight. In mid-May, workers in Karben rejected a “social contract” worked out by the union and management. The union responded with intimidation and pushed through another vote on a slightly modified version of the contract, which also foresees the closure of the plant by 2025. A similar procedure is now on the agenda for Bebra and Mühlhausen.

It is obvious that the trade unions are not fighting a principled battle for jobs. The Continental Corporation decided more than a year ago to cut 30,000 jobs and close dozens of sites, and IG Metall is playing the key role in this. It is no coincidence that the deputy IG Metall chairperson, Christiane Benner, is also deputy chairperson of the Continental supervisory board, for which she receives several hundred thousand euros a year. There is no doubt that she has been involved in all the plans for a long time.

The massive cuts, initially justified by pointing to the coronavirus pandemic, are now openly aimed at making the world’s second largest automotive supplier fit for the intensified competition on the world market and to increase profits for shareholders and investors. An important component of this is the conversion to electric mobility, which directly affects the Bebra-Mühlhausen plant network. These plants belong to Vitesco Technologies, the name under which Continental intends to float its former Powertrain division for drive technology on the stock exchange in September. The largest Vitesco sites are in Nuremberg (2,300 employees) and Regensburg (3,000 employees).

When the spin-off of Vitesco was decided in May, it

immediately led to an increase in Continental's profit expectations by at least one percentage point, from 5-6 to 6-7 percent, which shows that shareholders have full confidence in the implementation of the planned cuts. To profit from the e-boom, Vitesco wants to focus on electric drives in the future. The managers will then no longer have any use for sites such as Mühlhausen, which had previously produced control technology for combustion engines.

It has been known since September 2020 that the plant in Mühlhausen, with 160 jobs, will be closed by the end of 2022. In Regensburg, too, 2,100 Vitesco jobs will fall victim to profit maximisation. In Mühlhausen, Conti workers already tried last January to prevent the removal of machines through a blockade.

The workers' willingness to fight is beyond doubt. But the problem is that the IG Metall and IG BCE are not on the side of the workers but of management, whose perspective they represent. The union officials are masters at keeping workers busy with ineffective actions. They organise roadblocks, 24-hour strikes, religious services at the factory gate, spectacles with balloons, whistles and drums, and much more. But these protests stop exactly where the struggle only begins: with the capitalist profit interests.

The trade unions are completely oriented towards the welfare of Germany as a business location, from which their functionaries make a very good living. That is why they also support the transformation at Continental, which is currently attempting to sacrifice 30,000 jobs. And that is why they refuse to organise a strike to defend the jobs in Bebra and Mühlhausen.

In the strike ballot, workers in Bebra and Mühlhausen voted by 91.7 percent for indefinite strike. They must now implement this decision to strike and enforce it against the resistance of the trade unions. They must take the reins into their own hands and make this strike the starting point for an actual, joint industrial action of all Conti workers at all locations!

The first step must be to break with the IG Metall and IG BCE and their bankrupt methods, which only lead to deadlock. The *World Socialist Web Site* proposes that workers at each site build independent action committees that will enable them to unite across all sites and national boundaries to defend jobs together.

The corporation the Conti workers confront, and with

which IG Metall is in alliance, originally owed its influential position on the DAX (German stock exchange) to the Nazi era. Based on fascist tyranny, it was able to enrich itself immeasurably by supplying Germany's arms industry in the Second World War. In doing so, it did not shy away from extreme cruelty.

Just one example, cited by Wikipedia: Continental used concentration camp prisoners to test the durability of rubber shoe soles. The unfortunates chosen to do this had to run in circles for as long as they could, and anyone who fell down was shot. The rubber soles lasted for 2,200 kilometres.

Continental's current owner, the Schaeffler family, is one of the richest German billionaire families. Its managers have already made good on the losses from the stock market crisis of 2008 by putting pressure on the workers through dismissals and wage theft. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, they have again openly shown their willingness to walk over corpses.

While more and more plant closures and mass layoffs are being dictated, the group has seen a new upswing in its profits and exceeded analysts' expectations in the first quarter of 2021. Trade magazine *Autoweche* wrote: "Above all, the clear progress in profitability helped Conti shares jump to the top of the DAX on Friday." This has not prompted the corporation, or the union bureaucrats, to forgo the layoffs.

It is time to take up a determined fight against this corporation and its lackeys in the union bureaucracy! Any worker who decides to do so can count on the support of the *World Socialist Web Site*, the Sozialistischen Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) and all the rank-and-file committees for secure jobs!



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