

# Works council ready to hand over huge concessions to “save” Ford plant in Saarlouis, Germany

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10 October 2021

With Ford threatening to close its plant in Saarlouis, Germany, the general works council—a body of supposed “workers representatives,” including officials from the IG Metall, who sit on the corporate supervisory board—is pressuring workers to accept deep concessions to supposedly save the plant. At the same time, the works council and IG Metall have rejected any real struggle to defend the jobs, living standards and working conditions of the 5,000 workers who remain at the plant.

There is no other way to interpret the provocative letter to Ford workers across Germany issued by Martin Hennig, a works council member at the Cologne plant who just replaced Benjamin Gruschka, a longtime IG Metall shop steward at Ford.

In the letter issued last week, Hennig feigns opposition to Ford’s efforts to pit Saarlouis workers against their fellow workers in Cologne. “Why do they want a bidding competition between the two sites? Why should they each submit bids to win a future project, whatever that should be?” Hennig says Ford’s demands are “perfidious.”

Hennig is no babe in the woods. As a works council member in Cologne for 37 years and head of Ford’s general works council and European works council since 2013, he is very familiar with Ford’s strategy of pitting plant against plant. In fact, Hennig is a master at doing just that against the workforce.

Resorting to the economic nationalism that is the stock-in-trade of the labor bureaucracy all over the world, Hennig complains about Ford’s plans to move production of electric car powertrains to the United Kingdom. “The Halewood transmission plant in the UK and Cologne had to compete against each other. Supposedly, the result is still open. The grapevine says otherwise,” suggests Hennig, who as a longtime chairman on the European General Works Council and a member of the Ford

Supervisory Board does not rely on the “grapevine.” Hennig complains that the shifting of production to the UK after the union agreed to concessions at the Cologne plant “was neither fair nor transparent. The Cologne initiatives, improvements and savings were gleefully accepted, but not for our transmission plant.”

In other words, if things had been “fair” and “transparent,” the cost cutting at Cologne should have been sufficient in keeping power-train production for EVs in Cologne and cutting out the workers in the UK. In other words, Hennig has no problem aiding Ford in its “perfidious” work, as long as IG Metall can continue to collect dues from German workers whose wages, benefits and working conditions the union and works council are giving away.

As early as February, the chairman of the works council in Saarlouis, Markus Thal, who like Hennig is a member of the Ford supervisory board, pointed out that more jobs had already been cut than the company management had originally demanded. However, he said, the fact that this was being done “without any signal about the location and without any answer regarding a possible future perspective” was “not a fair way of dealing with the employees in Saarlouis.”

In other words, for worthless promises to continue production after 2024, the union and works council are prepared to push through further attacks on the workforce. “We can do it in Saarlouis; we can also build electric cars, even with a corresponding profit rate,” Thal announced during a union protest in September. When the bosses in Detroit set a target of a 6 percent profit margin, Thal replied, “Yes, we can.”

The highly paid works council representatives know exactly what this means for the workers. At present, management “obviously no longer has any taboos, not

with regard to working time regulations, not with regard to bonuses, not with regard to compensation payments. The workforce is supposed to bleed, is supposed to pay and deliver at the same time,” Hennig insincerely complains in his letter.

Hennig makes it clear the works council and IG Metall will do anything management demands but asks Ford to make some gesture that will help the union prevent a revolt. “We still assume that we all think and work for the good of the company. However, we obviously have to bring the good of the workforce back to mind,” Hennig writes. For serious discussions, he continues, “We are always available; we would like to have them from top management.”

It is becoming increasingly clear that Ford workers in Saarlouis, who are ready to fight just as in Cologne, Valencia, Craiova and all other plants, can only defend their jobs through a rebellion against Ford’s co-managers in the trade unions and works councils. They are the ones who have pushed through all Ford’s attacks against the workforce in recent years and are preparing to do so again.

Currently, only the Ford Focus is produced at the Saarlouis plant. Ford’s top management has said it is going to wait until spring next year before it announces whether the plant, with nearly 5,000 employees, will continue to operate or whether it will be closed, as many workers fear.

In recent weeks and months, the Saarlouis works council has organized several protest actions. At the “Day of Action” on September 14, more than 4,000 workers from Ford, the suppliers and other industrial companies in the Saarland came together to demonstrate their opposition to the closing of the plant, which has a long and rich history in the region.

Construction of the plant began in 1966, and the first vehicle, a Ford Escort, rolled off the production line in 1970. Since then, Ford has produced seven different models and more than 15 million cars in Saarlouis. Of the almost 7,000 employees who once worked there, a little less than 5,000 remain today. Together with 2,000 employees in supplier companies, they will probably continue to produce the Ford Focus until mid-2025.

Ford’s top management is refusing to give any commitment to continue production of another model. Behind this is the company’s attempt to play off workers in Saarlouis against their colleagues in Valencia, Spain, using the Sword of Damocles of plant closures and to blackmail them into making further concessions.

Earlier this year, the plant in Cologne received a commitment to build Ford’s first electric car in Europe. The Cologne plant was told it was competing with the factory in Craiova, Romania, among others, which can produce more cheaply simply because of low wages. This served primarily to dictate the conditions in Cologne.

Ford’s German boss Gunnar Herrmann explained at the time that the basis for this decision had been laid with the restructuring program launched two years ago, when Ford announced plans to cut 25,000 jobs worldwide, including 12,000 in Europe and more than 5,000 in Germany. Plants have been or will be closed in Brazil, in France and Wales, and as many as four production facilities in Russia. Ford recently announced it would end all production in India.

The trade unions and their representatives in the factories have been responsible for implementing the job cuts in all countries over the past two years.

The case of the Saarlouis plant is no different. The works council there is fully responsible for the dramatic effects of the 2019 restructuring program. By agreeing to the elimination of the night shift, it paved the way for 1,800 job cuts. A further 600 jobs will be cut this year.

To push through further attacks, workers in Saarlouis and Valencia in Spain are now to be driven to compete over future production of another electric car model. Valencia is where key SUVs like the Ford Kuga are built. “The US group is very likely to keep this factory,” writes finance daily *Handelsblatt*.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties announced the formation of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) in May to coordinate workers’ struggles worldwide against corporate attacks. We call on Ford workers in Saarlouis, Cologne and around the world to build action committees independent of the unions to prepare joint strikes and protests to defend the jobs of workers all over the world.



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