IG Metall's "Fair Change Day of Action": A repulsive masquerade by the German union bureaucracy

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The nationwide action day organized by the IG Metall (IGM) trade union on Friday under the slogan "Fair change—for a social, ecological and democratic transformation" was a repulsive masquerade. The union used it to offer itself to the incoming federal government and industry, to help push through mass job cuts—and to suppress the growing opposition to them.

The big corporations, especially among the automakers and their suppliers, have announced the elimination of hundreds of thousands of jobs. On the backs of the workers, they are waging a brutal international war for markets, which is increasingly openly turning into a trade war and preparations for military aggression. Under the pretext of technological change and the coronavirus pandemic, they are squeezing workers ever further in the interests of their profits.

At the same time, the steel industry needs billions of euros of investments to produce so-called green steel based on hydrogen in the future. The steel shareholders are not thinking of spending their own money on this but are demanding billions in state subsidies. Otherwise, they are threatening plant closures and mass layoffs.

Resentment is growing in the plants against this general attack on workers, which has the full support of all the parties in the Bundestag (federal parliament)—including the Social Democratic Party (SPD), Greens and Liberal Democrats (FDP), who are currently drawing up a government programme.

Consequently, at the rally in front of the Reichstag (parliament building) in Berlin, IGM Chairman Jörg Hofmann addressed the incoming federal government directly: "Our goal is modern, sustainable business while maintaining strong social cohesion in our society."

The union fears that an explosive movement is developing in the factories that it can no longer control. Rightly so, because the union has lost much of its influence in recent years due to its close collaboration with the corporations.

Even though the industries affected employ several million people, just 50,000 took part in the day of action in more than 50 cities nationwide, according to union figures.

In Berlin, the union did not manage to gather more than 500 of its members, even though thousands of workers fear for their jobs at the Siemens dynamo plant there, at Daimler in Marienfelde, at the steelworks in Eisenhüttenstadt and other plants in the region.

Less than 1,000 people came to Eisenach, where between 5,000 and 6,000 jobs are directly threatened at the Opel plant and the auto suppliers in Thuringia.

In North Rhine-Westphalia, a total of 9,000 workers took part in the actions in Cologne, Düsseldorf, Lüdenscheid, Bielefeld and Duisburg, according to union sources.

In the steel city, the alliance between IG Metall and the corporations became particularly clear. The union had called for a nationwide central rally in front of the Thyssenkrupp steel mill in the north of Duisburg, where around 12,000 people work. Although IG Metall had additionally brought in steelworkers from Krefeld (Outokumpu and Deutsche Edelstahl-Werke), Bochum, Dortmund and the south of Duisburg by bus, only a few thousand participants assembled.

Thyssenkrupp itself had ordered "shutdowns" for the majority of the Duisburg workforce. Those who were not scheduled to maintain necessary functions in the steel mill had to take time credits, flextime or vacation.

The day of action was openly supported by the companies. A Thyssenkrupp spokeswoman said that although the rally was "purely an IG Metall event," the company could identify with its aims.

The President of the German Steel Federation, Hans Jürgen Kerkhoff, also fully supported the day of action. A new German government must "make the transformation of the steel industry a focus of its work in its first 100 days," he demanded. "It is good and proper that the steel employees are pointing this out emphatically as part of IG Metall's day of action."

The entire day of action was marked by the union closing ranks with companies and governments at state and federal level. High-ranking government representatives spoke at all the rallies. In Duisburg, the newly elected North Rhine-Westphalia Minister President Hendrik Wüst (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) spoke, in Berlin, Federal Labour Minister Hubertus Heil (SPD) and SPD leader Norbert-Walter Borjans, and in

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Eisenach, Thuringia's Minister President Bodo Ramelow (Left Party).

Politicians, works council representatives and union officials competed in their nationalist demagogy, borrowing from the arsenal of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD). In Eisenach, union representatives agitated against workers in "low-wage countries," against "Asians" and "French managers."

Among the few workers who showed up at these actions, the mood was completely different. Many were interested to take the statement of the Sozialistische Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) "Defend all jobs in the auto industry! Break with the IG Metall and form independent rank-and-file committees! Unite workers internationally!"

In discussions with SGP representatives, numerous workers gave vent to their anger at the role of government, companies and the IG Metall. Duisburg steelworker Cihan declared: "This is a mess here. This is about the company, not about us. If it were up to me, the action would be voluntary. And then I wouldn't be here."

The steelworker, who has not been in the union for ten years, said, "The company constantly announces job cuts, 1,000 here, 2,000 there. But then IG Metall never calls for protests." His colleagues Thorsten and Mesut also agreed: "There's no point in that." Because, Thorsten said, "The bottom line is that IG Metall is also sitting up there," pointing to the upper floors of Thyssenkrupp's headquarters, where the executive board also sits. "In the past, we had real works council representatives that also fought for us. But today they sit up there and are happy to get their money."

He said you could see that in collective bargaining, which was a rigged game, as well as in the token demos. "So, the last twenty years, I haven't even been on a proper strike. If we did, then it was just a small demo here, which went for one to two hours, and that was from 10 to 12 o'clock and then over. Either I go on strike properly, or not at all."

Significantly, rumours are circulating among Thyssen workers that Oliver Burkhard, the former North Rhine-Westphalia IGM district secretary and current head of human resources at Thyssenkrupp's parent company, could soon become the successor to company boss Martina Merz.

When Thorsten learned that the German secret service had placed the SGP under surveillance and lists it in its annual report as "left-wing extremist" because it stands up against capitalism and militarism and for a "democratic egalitarian socialist society," he had to smile in surprise: "Anything they don't like up there, they don't want, and they go against it."

In Eisenach, the SGP's international perspective and its call to organize independently also met with support among workers at the rally. Workers spoke about the threatened plant closure and the dramatic consequences for the entire region.

Much interest was aroused by the growing strike wave of American workers. For example, Amir, Marco and Laurin—three apprentices at the Opel plant—supported the strike of more than 10,000 workers at agricultural machinery manufacturer John Deere after hearing about it from SGP campaigners.

Just how nervous unions are about building an independent international movement of working classes against global corporations was evident in Saarlouis. There, the IG Metall reacted to the SGP's intervention by calling the police.

Around 5,000 people work in the Ford plants in Saarlouis, when there is not short-time working, as is currently the case. The works council plays a key role in enforcing management's demands for a reduction in the workforce. In an information letter, it reports with satisfaction that 430 of a predefined 600 workers have already left the plant after receiving severance pay this year: "We want to manage the remaining part as well and are all working together to achieve this."

In Saarlouis, too, only a few hundred Ford workers were among the fewer than 2,000 who took part. Because the SGP statement met with lively interest among them, the union first sent in its stewards, who went through the ranks issuing the slogan: "Do not accept!"

When this did not work, the IGM officials began to intimidate SGP members with authoritarian and aggressive behaviour. When they were unsuccessful, they called the police to enforce the IG Metall's alleged "domiciliary rights" without any legal basis, since it was a public event in the open air.

Nothing could better illustrate the character of IG Metall. It fears a united struggle of international workers against the front of global corporations and national governments since it is itself on the other side of the barricades. The unions, as the SGP statement puts it, "have transformed themselves over the past four decades from reformist workers organizations into paid lackeys of capital."

Workers must draw the necessary conclusions from this. They can only defend their jobs, rights and gains by coordinating their struggles internationally and settling political and organizational scores with the nationalist trade unions. This requires building independent rank-and-file committees and a socialist perspective.

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