

John Deere workers in Germany support strike action in US

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The strike by 10,000 workers at the world's largest agricultural equipment manufacturer John Deere, now entering its fourth week, is meeting with growing support from coworkers in Germany and Europe. For the second time, workers in four US states on Tuesday rejected a sellout tentative agreement that failed to meet workers' demands to recoup decades of cuts to wages, health care and retirement.

Workers at the John Deere site in Mannheim, Germany—home to the company's European headquarters and to Germany's largest tractor factory, with about 2,800 workers—told the *World Socialist Web Site* yesterday they were enthusiastic about the rejection of the tentative agreement. "Of course I support the strike!" said Fardin, who heard about it for the first time. "I think it's good that you're informing about what's happening in the American factories."

"I hope the best for my colleagues in the US," says Mehmet, a young worker who only recently started working at John Deere. "Their strike will probably affect us in the next few weeks as well. It's really unfair what's being done to them there—and to us, too: a colleague and I noticed yesterday that our conveyor belt was running eight seconds too fast. With a turnaround time of 4.5 minutes, that makes a difference of five tractors a day. But I was afraid to call IG Metall [the trade union] about it, because I've only been working here for two months and I need my job."

The work stoppages in the US could soon create favourable conditions for a strike in Mannheim, Björn said. "I'm keeping my fingers crossed for them that everything goes well over there. We'll notice it here in four weeks, when we get bottlenecks with transmission parts. If it starts here too, [management] will be quite puzzled, because there's a lot of money flowing through here. I'm anxious and curious to see where this

goes. They're going to divide society quite a bit."

"The problem in the US will be that the unions are lulled and bribed," Björn said. He suggests that Deere workers "form a separate union with people you really trust—and then go full throttle. They have no other choice."

Two weeks ago, a team of *World Socialist Web Site* reporters campaigned at the Mannheim plant for them to back their striking US colleagues. The team distributed a leaflet on the strike wave in the US and explained that the strike at John Deere was a direct result of workers' efforts to organize themselves into rank-and-file committees independent of unions and works councils. This perspective resonated with workers in Mannheim, and dozens declared their support for the strike.

Many of those who had already expressed support for the strike on October 20 spoke again to the WSWS yesterday. Michael, who also first learned of the strike through the WSWS team, said: "If the strike continues, I also expect it to have an impact on the plant here in Mannheim. I support the strike and believe most here would do the same."

Steffen and Ege also backed the strike when the WSWS team was in Mannheim on October 20. Steffen said yesterday that he had already read the WSWS statement on the strike and was pleased that US workers had rejected the agreement between the UAW and management for the second time. "It is good that they are asserting their claims in this way. They have my support and I wish them every success."

Several reported that the Mannheim works council reacted to the WSWS team's intervention with significant concern and sent an email to all employees one day later, in which it "distanced itself from this action" and declared that it had "nothing to do with it."

Osman, who has worked for the company for many years, commented: “The works councils have always been on the side of the employers, especially in Germany. I’m also considering leaving IG Metall.”

A young worker who spoke to the WSWS for the second time, and asked to remain anonymous, said: “I heard of it—partly because we expect parts shortages of course, we have five weeks’ notice. But we haven’t heard anything from the official side, not even from the unions.”

He said he was fully backing the strike, but had to fear reprisals: “I can’t put my job on the line. I’ve only been there three months and I’m hoping for a permanent contract. If I had that, I would be on board right away. These people aren’t striking for no reason, but because of the inflation. The company should clearly concede to them—they could afford it!”

Manuel, who works in logistics at John Deere, also spoke of the complete silence of IG Metall and the works council: ‘Nobody here tells us anything about the strike. But we [in logistics] are already noticing that we are no longer getting certain parts. When you ask about it, you’re told it’s because of the strike in the US.’ Joint action by John Deere workers at the international level “is something I support,” says Manuel. “I’m behind my colleagues in the US. I’m not surprised that IG Metall isn’t making big news about their strike.”

Another supporter, who asked to remain anonymous, said of the role of the union, “IG Metall claims that the workers in Mannheim cannot change anything about the developments in the US. That is a lie. We in Mannheim must support this strike!” The reason for the works council’s email, he said, is that most workers support the strike. IG Metall’s concern, he said, is that workers in Germany might also go on strike out of solidarity.

In the US, the United Auto Workers (UAW) union also did everything it could to keep workers in the dark about the plans it had worked out with management: Only two days before the vote, mere “highlights” from the tentative agreement in question were made public, so workers had no opportunity to study the contract that was supposed to determine their working conditions for years to come. After US John Deere workers rejected the contract, UAW headquarters, in alarm, said it would “discuss next steps *with the company* [emphasis

added]” and communicate the results of those secret discussions to workers “through the local union.”

At Deere’s largest plant in Waterloo, Iowa, the workforce actually rejected the contract by a 71 percent majority, but the result was not announced until the final count at all plants, so as not to fuel rejection at other plants. At a prior union informational meeting in Waterloo on Tuesday, heated exchanges erupted between union representatives and workers, during which one worker was cut off from the microphone for criticizing the sellout.

The strike in the US shows that a real fight against current and future management attacks is only possible to the extent that workers organize internationally, independent of the unions. The Deere Workers Rank-and-File Committee was formed by workers in the US to counter the conspiracy of management and the union and to unite workers in a broad, international campaign, drawing together Deere’s international workforce and workers at auto companies such as Volvo and parts suppliers such as Dana.

Amid an emerging class confrontation in Europe and America, the struggles in the auto and metal industries must be linked to the struggles of teachers and nurses, rail and logistics workers, and all other sections of the working class—with the perspective of a comprehensive general strike to win back wages, defend all jobs, and oppose the governments’ and corporations’ policies of mass infection and social cuts.



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