

Ford plants in Germany and Spain told to present their cutback plans

Oppose the IG Metall and works council—Form independent rank-and-file committees!

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Ford workers in Saarlouis find themselves on short-time working this week. But this does not apply to the union-appointed works council representatives, because together with the group management, they are working out the cuts that are going to be imposed on the workers in Saarlouis.

If Ford workers in Saarlouis and Valencia, Spain do not oppose the works councils and trade unions and unite independently to defend all jobs, tens of thousands of positions will be lost—at both sites.

European management has asked the plants in Saarlouis and Valencia to submit their savings plans to them by Thursday. The site that slashes the most costs is to be awarded the contract to build a new electric model. The works councils at both plants have been negotiating this with the respective plant managements for months and are preparing huge attacks: job cuts, wage cuts, working-time extensions, holiday reductions, etc.

In a letter, Spanish factory management demanded from workers “the reduction of wage costs, the extension of daily working hours and an increase in the number of working days per year.” Otherwise, the plant was threatened with closure. The Spanish works council under José Luís Parra complained, but assured management, “We know no red lines and are ready to negotiate.”

In Germany, the general works council draws up the threatening letters issued by the factory management. “We have already been told quite clearly that Valencia has considerable advantages, especially with regards to personnel costs,” explains the acting chairman of the German Ford general works council, Martin Henning, in a circular. Allegedly, labour costs in Spain were one-third lower than in Germany.

What this means for the workers in Saarlouis is clear. They will have to accept huge cuts. Some of those affected told the WSWs that the factory was talking about cuts of €120

million per year. Among other things, the three daily breaks are to be halved from a total of one hour to 30 minutes. The millions that are squeezed out of the workforce in this way can then flow directly to the shareholders and hedge funds through their dividend payments.

The brutal extortion being planned has been the number one topic of conversation among Ford workers for weeks and months, who fear for their jobs and wages. The works council, under the direction of the IG Metall union, is exploiting this fear.

At the end of last year, Markus Thal, works council chairman in Saarlouis, said he was pinning his hopes for “saving the plant” primarily on workers’ willingness to make sacrifices. “They had always supported concessions in the past and are also prepared to make concessions now,” the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quotes him saying.

Thal had not asked the workers beforehand. “I don’t know that we were asked,” reports one Ford worker from Saarlouis in a conversation with the WSWs. “In any case, nobody talked to me about it. But I would be interested to know what was contained in the Saarlouis offer,” he says. But he and his colleagues had not heard anything through the union. The workforce must read everything in the media.

Complaints by the trade unions and works councils in Germany and Spain about the company’s actions—Spanish trade union functionaries spoke of being forced into gladiator-like “hunger games”—are reminiscent of the perpetrator shouting “Stop thief!” to hide his crime. In both countries, they play off the workforces against each other. Their media-reported complaints are only the background music to the attacks they themselves help devise and impose on the workers.

Management has been able to rely on the trade unions for years. Ford has already closed several plants in Europe in the past. A first wave of closures affected the plants in

Southampton and Dagenham (UK) in 2013 and the plant in Genk (Belgium) in 2014. Only five years later, in 2019, plants in Russia, France and again Britain were closed, and a plant in Slovakia sold off.

Now, Saarlouis and Valencia are being urged to outdo each other in the cuts they offer. Germany and Spain are the two most important car-producing countries in Europe. In Spain, the auto industry—with plants belonging to VW, Mercedes, Renault, Stellantis (Citroën, Opel, Peugeot) and Ford—is one of the most important sectors of the economy. The situation is even more pronounced in Germany.

Ford has been producing cars in Saarland for over 50 years. Of the 7,000 workers who once worked at the plant, fewer than 5,000 remain today. But in Saarland alone, a total of about 40,000 jobs in the supplier industry depend on the plant.

The Ford plant in Almussafes, Valencia, looks back on a similar history. It has been in existence for almost five decades. Of the 9,000 who used to work there, just under 6,000 are still employed and 30,000 more jobs are at stake in the regional supplier industry.

In view of the importance of the plants, the Ford group is relying not only on the trade unions and works councils, but on governments to extort money.

According to media reports, Spanish head of government Pedro Sánchez (PSOE) has held out the prospect of subsidies for the factory to convert to e-mobility if Valencia wins the competition. The carmaker has been receiving millions in subsidies from the regional government in Valencia for years. “We stand by Ford,” assures Valencia's state premier Ximo Puig, who, like Sánchez, is a member of the social democratic PSOE.

Saarland state Premier Tobias Hans (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and his Social Democratic Economics Minister Anke Rehlinger are also giving assurances of state support, saying the state government was doing “everything possible.” The “strong solidarity” between the workforce, the works council, the trade unions, local management, and the state government is also understood in Detroit, London and Cologne. The *Saarbrücker Zeitung* quotes Hans as saying. “That certainly made an impression on Ford Europe boss Stuart Rowley, with whom I spoke.”

In Germany and Spain, the state and regional governments are also backing the construction of battery plants in the immediate vicinity of the existing factories. In Saarland, Chinese manufacturer S-Volt announced it would build a large battery plant just 20 kilometres from the Ford factory.

Almussafes has also announced the construction of a huge battery production facility right next to the Ford plant. Ford is said to be among the investors. Germany's finance daily *Handelsblatt* and Spanish daily *El Pais* conclude that this

greatly increases the chances for the Valencia plant in the bidding war.

Time is pressing. The decision to award the contract for a new electric model is to be made by June 30. Before then, the initiative must be taken out of the hands of the works councils and trade unions. They are not the solution to the threat to jobs, but part of the problem facing workers in Germany, Spain and around the world. They not only accept the undercutting competition, where only the plant with the lowest costs survives. They also work out the cuts themselves and enforce them.

This trade union policy leads to an unrelenting downwards spiral. What will the situation be like in four or five years? Will the factory that is “winning” now have to compete against Ford factories in Romania or Turkey and the low wages paid there?

In a previous article, we wrote, “In order to resist the blackmail of management and the works councils, a new political orientation is necessary, which proceeds from the common interests of all workers in all locations and opposes the logic of the capitalist profit system. Workers must take the defence of their interests and their rights into their own hands and organise themselves completely independently of the pro-capitalist trade unions and their works councils.”

All those who are serious about defending jobs and working conditions must now put on the emergency brake. Ford workers in Saarlouis, Valencia, Cologne and other plants must form rank-and-file committees independent of the unions, link up with each other and discuss a common strategy against the top management, governments, unions and works councils.

The International Committee of the Fourth International and its affiliated Socialist Equality Parties will support you. We have formed the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees to coordinate workers' struggles worldwide against the corporate attacks. Contact us today!



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