

Tesla-Berlin: Build an independent rank-and-file committee instead of electing a union-led works council!

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The Tesla Gigafactory 4 in Grünheide, north of Berlin, has been built but does not yet have official approval. The actual start of production is scheduled for March. According to Brandenburg's state Minister of Economics, Jörg Steinbach (Social Democratic Party, SPD), approval is "nearly there."

Tesla boss Elon Musk had his Gigafactory built at lightning speed, despite the lack of permits and against many objections by citizens and environmental groups. All the objections concerning deforestation, groundwater problems, illegal extensions, wage dumping and slave-like working conditions on the construction site were brushed aside by Musk. Although he violated all legal regulations, establishment politicians, big business and the trade unions rolled out the red carpet for him. Quite a few celebrated him as a messiah who would bring innovation, salvation and prosperity and finally show how to set new standards in Germany as well.

For many, Tesla's announcement that a works council would be elected as early as February 28, 2022 came as something of a surprise. Although, or rather precisely because, the actual core workforce has not even been recruited, Tesla is setting the pace here as well. IG Metall, the trade union that has long served as an advocate for company interests in the auto industry, immediately welcomed the formation of the works council, but complained about the premature deadline.

Elon Musk, considered the richest man in the world, has raked in his billions not least through his unscrupulous methods of exploitation and suppression of any resistance in his factories in the USA. It is no contradiction at all if he has obviously taken a liking to the German model of union-management "co-determination."

After all, he can regulate everything of interest to him through a works council obliged by the Works Constitution Act to collaborate closely and confidentially with management. When it comes to overtime, work schedules, extended shift times, breaks or even dismissals, he can have all this implemented with the help of the works council. If workers complain or even revolt, it is the legal task of the works council to stand up for the "welfare of the enterprise."

This official "workers' representation," regulated by law, has nothing to do with a real representation of workers' interests. Even if it wanted to, a works council is not allowed to call for strikes or other industrial action. How often have workers in factories had to listen to the works council representatives complaining that their "hands are tied," they are subject to a "duty of confidentiality," they are obliged to maintain "industrial peace," and so on?

Should IG Metall succeed in introducing collective agreements at Tesla, this would be linked to the legal obligation to maintain "industrial peace." During the term of these agreements, which often run over three years, strikes are officially prohibited.

For these reasons, the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Sozialistische

Gleichheitspartei (Socialist Equality Party, SGP) oppose the formation of a works council at Tesla. A works council, whether under management control or under the direction of IG Metall, would not improve working conditions. On the contrary, wherever works councils and trade unions have influence, wages and working conditions have been significantly worsened in recent years.

These bureaucratic apparatuses are there to control workers and suppress and divide their struggles. They strive to prevent them from becoming the starting point for a broader working-class movement.

Instead, we call on workers to build their own independent rank-and-file committees at Tesla, democratically elected and controlled by the workers themselves. Such organisations are vital for linking up with fellow Tesla workers in the US and around the world and preparing a common struggle.

The IG Metall trade union, which has hardly been represented at Tesla so far, is running a membership campaign in front of the factory premises, but so far quite unsuccessfully. The number of members is now in three figures, it announced meekly. One could also say: this is a clear indication of how hated the trade unions have become among workers, especially in the former East Germany.

At the same time, IG Metall is doing everything it can to talk to Tesla, but Musk has shown no interest so far. The IG Metall bureaucracy now fears that Elon Musk might not bring them on board.

Is a works council even desirable?

According to the press, 19 works council representatives are to be elected, which indicates that Tesla has hired just over 2,000 staff so far. Eventually, 6,000 workers are to be employed in production by the summer and 12,000 by the end of the year. However, the works council would have to be re-elected after two years.

The statement by Birgit Dietze, IG Metall district leader for Berlin, Brandenburg and Saxony, shows what she is concerned about. Her comment that the posts recruited so far are mainly filled by managers and engineers, and that the elected works council therefore does not represent the subsequent workforce, may even be true. Naturally, Tesla has an interest in installing a works council staffed by its people.

But the real question for the many thousands of production workers who will soon be toiling there is quite different: Is a works council with or without IG Metall participation even desirable? Why should the new workforce, which will very quickly come into conflict with Musk's foul working methods, voluntarily create a second adversary?

All previous experience shows that in large companies, with a hundred-strong works council and as many union shop stewards, the workers fight on two fronts. On the one hand, they fight against the constant attacks of the corporate elites. On the other, they fight against the so-called “workers’ representatives” who serve as their henchmen and are tantamount to company police.

The painful experiences workers have had in recent decades in the auto industry are clear. Everywhere, whether at VW, Daimler, BMW, Opel or Ford, it has always been the well-paid IG Metall works council representatives who have pushed through endless savings measures, job cuts or extra work in the closest cooperation with management. And always with the nationalist and pro-capitalist argument that concessions had to be made so that the respective location remained competitive—whereas the others can go to the dogs.

Even within one company, workers at different production sites are systematically played off against each other. Currently, this is exactly what is happening at Ford between sites in Saarlouis in Germany and Valencia in Spain.

It is a big misconception to equate the state-recognised institution of the works council with a real representation of workers’ interests. The same applies to the trade unions, which traditionally occupy the works council positions and thus exercise their power.

The media often talk about the “powerful works council bosses,” without whom nothing would proceed at Volkswagen, for example. That is true, but only in the interests of management. They never use their power to put the company in its place, but only to enforce its targets against the workforce.

At Tesla, too, the last thing that IG Metall is concerned about is the interests of ordinary workers. Rather, they look forward to occupying the lucrative works council positions and becoming co-managers. This is a basic prerequisite for moving up the career ladder. Throughout the German auto industry, and not only there, works council representatives and trade union bureaucrats sit on supervisory boards and earn handsomely for their services. Quite often, works council leaders later change sides and become personnel directors or top managers with salaries in the millions.

Social partnership

Germany’s “co-determination” model was created as a means of containing the class struggle. Works councils have proved to be a boon for the capitalists and corporate overlords. Using this instrument of “social partnership,” they have so far mostly succeeded in keeping workers in the factories quiet and nipping any major resistance in the bud. In all large factories, works councils act as company police, keeping the workforce under control.

IG Metall is playing a key role in the conversion and restructuring to electric vehicle production in the auto industry. Completely new working conditions are being established and production is being accelerated enormously. Tesla is playing a pioneering role in this. Volkswagen boss Herbert Diess described the establishment of the competitor in Brandenburg as a “stroke of luck” because it gave VW a new competitor against which it could “measure itself.” The aim was to undercut Tesla’s production time of 10 hours per car, he said. VW currently needs twice that time for its ID.3 electric vehicle.

But Diess is not the only one who admires Elon Musk as a role model and sees Tesla as a benchmark for future methods of exploitation. The president of the German Association of the Automotive Industry (VDA), Hildegard Müller, would also have nothing against Tesla becoming a

member of the association, she said. “With my experience in other industries, I would like to emphasise how important social partnership is,” Müller told the *Berliner Tagesspiegel*. “Because in times of such fundamental transformations, companies and employees have the same goal. I also see the trade unions as partners in the discussion about improving Germany as a business location.”

Even the conservative *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) advised Musk not to dispense with the services of IG Metall. “In the fundamental question of what to make of the Tesla investment, which is still disputed in part politically, IG Metall is clearly positioning itself in Musk’s favour,” emphasised the pro-business paper. The article went on to quote IG Metall district leader Dietze, who said, “For the first time in decades, a corporation is creating thousands of industrial jobs in eastern Germany.” This was “good news and a strong commitment to Germany as an investment location.”

According to the FAZ, IG Metall “also stands out from those opponents of industry that are all too numerous around Berlin, with a clearly positive basic view of Musk’s major investment. IG Metall’s approach could also please Musk. Worries that he might end up in the position of a VW boss are unnecessary.”

The huge increases in sales and profits that almost all car companies have enjoyed during the pandemic, while millions of lives have been wiped out, are a result of this much-vaunted “social partnership.” Instead of advocating the closure of non-essential plants to stop the coronavirus or providing safeguards, works councils and trade unions have kept production going to enable an explosion in profits. Tesla is at the forefront of these crisis profiteers.

As for Musk, the charity Oxfam notes in its recent report how he has received billions of dollars in government subsidies while “violating labour laws and undermining factory workers’ efforts to organise.”

In 2018, Musk paid no income tax, criticising a proposed tax on billionaires with the brazen argument that his plan was to “use the money to take humanity to Mars and preserve the light of consciousness.” In the early stages of the pandemic, he resumed production at his Tesla car factory in California against the orders of the health authorities, putting thousands of workers at risk of contracting COVID-19.

In Grünheide, Tesla had the Gigafactory 4 built in record time, semi-illegally, creating a fait accompli. About half a million vehicles are to be produced there annually with an initial workforce of 12,000, starting with the Tesla Model Y and then moving onto the Tesla Model 3. In addition, Tesla wants to build Europe’s largest battery and recycling factory right nextdoor, which will later employ about 2,000 workers. The state and federal governments have offered Musk, a 250-fold billionaire, over a billion euros in subsidies for this, which he ultimately turned down, presumably because he found the associated requirements too onerous.



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