

# Ford Saarlouis and Valencia plants: The blackmail continues

## Ford workers form rank-and-file committee to defend their jobs

**Dietmar Gaisenkersting**  
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Ford management and the works councils are blackmailing workers at the Saarlouis plant in Germany and its counterpart at Almussafes in the Spanish province of Valencia, playing off one location against the other. Now, workers in Saarlouis have formed an independent rank-and-file committee to counter this and ally with their colleagues in Spain.

Ford wants to have completely converted its production to electric vehicles by 2030 and, like all auto manufacturers and large suppliers, is taking advantage of this to simultaneously grind down wages and working conditions while cutting jobs. Ford in Europe has announced electrification plans for plants in Cologne (Germany), Kocaeli (Turkey) and Craiova (Romania). However, the plants at Almussafes and Saarlouis must compete against each other in an internal “bidding war” for the commitment to produce an electric model. Only one of the two plants is expected to last beyond 2025.

Since Jim Farley took over as head of the second-largest US carmaker in autumn 2020, he has been waging a veritable social war against Ford workers. He is mercilessly pruning the company for profit in the interests of shareholders and investors. In October, he announced a complete halt to production in India, where 4,000 Ford workers and many thousands more in the supplier factories will lose their jobs.

Investors and stockbrokers applauded. All last year, Ford reported rising profits and will see a 2021 profit explosion to between \$9.5 billion and \$11.5 billion. That is about \$5 billion more than had been assumed at the beginning of the year.

The bidding war is part of this rabid offensive against workers. But the worst thing in the current dispute is the limitless cowardice and complete bankruptcy of the trade unions and their works council representatives. It is they—IG Metall in Germany and the UGT in Spain—who have agreed to the brutal inter-plant competition and are playing off and inciting the workers of each plant against the other. The wage-reduction offers, extension of working time, reduction of holiday entitlement, deterioration of working conditions, this whole shameful list of social cuts is being worked out by the works councils and union officials and bears their signature.

Part of the despicable spectacle is the whining of some works

council representatives and their grovelling before management. A few months ago, some works council representatives of the German (not the Spanish!) sites asked, in a joint begging letter to Ford’s European boss Stuart Rowley if there were not a way to end the bidding war. “It is the opposite of social partnership and divides workforces across borders and locations,” their letter pleads.

No, this is not the opposite of social partnership but the result of it. As co-managers—as the works council representatives and IG Metall officials like to call themselves—they have organised the social cuts for years and justified them to the workforce. Their pseudo-protests were never more than theatrics to better sell the cuts. It is this obsequiousness that encourages management to launch ever newer and ever harsher social attacks.

In the face of the brutal threats from the USA, the works councils in Germany are moving even closer together with their factory management, the federal government and state administration in Saarland. Their counterparts in Spain are doing the same with the governments in Madrid and Valencia. Saarland’s Minister-President Tobias Hans (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and his Minister of Economics Anke Rehlinger (Social Democratic Party, SPD) have pledged their support to Ford in a joint statement if the plant in Saarlouis is retained. They expressed optimism because the Chinese company SVolt is building two factories in which batteries for up to 500,000 electric vehicles per year will be produced. In addition, there are “clear promises of support from the state and federal government.” Federal Minister of Labour Hubertus Heil (SPD) had also offered that the necessary retraining and further professional development of Ford employees would be financed by the state Labour Agency from unemployment insurance funds.

Political and company representatives in Spain point to similar state support and the construction of a battery factory next to the plant in Almussafes, which has already begun.

Based on such support, the Saarland and Valencia plants—the local plant managements and their respective works councils—submitted their bids to Ford’s European headquarters

in Cologne last week. Both works councils offered far-reaching cuts.

The UGT representatives, according to Spanish newspapers, came to Cologne last week specifically to strike a deal with Ford's European headquarters. The Spanish press reports that the Almussafes works council, led by José Luis Parra of the majority union UGT, agreed to a 10 percent pay cut, one week less vacation per year and a 30 minute increase in daily working hours. Wages were not to increase for the next five years. Already, the wage level there is said to be about one-third lower than in Germany.

The works council in Saarlouis, led by Markus Thal, together with his works council colleagues in Cologne, are also said to have offered cuts of 120 million euros a year and a halving of the daily break time to 30 minutes. But these are rumours; Ford workers have not been officially informed about them.

The UGT works council has said it received approval for the cuts in an internal poll among UGT members. IGM works council chair Thal has simply imputed this willingness to the workers.

A worker from Saarlouis told WSWS that he and his colleagues had not been asked: "What is going on here right now is a disaster. It can't be that a works council chairman decides about 4,800 people without asking us." The workers had been promised the production of the Kuga, which is still being built in Valencia, "we were already bleeding." "Then they cut 2,000 from the night shift." Last year, production of the C-Max would have been stopped.

He recalls the closure of Ford's Belgian plant in Genk in 2014. "Colleagues there had also received a commitment for the production of the Mondeo, which then also went to Valencia."

"When are the concessions for?" he asks. "For now? Or from 2025? We don't know all that."

That will remain the case. Ford's general works council chairman Benjamin Gruschka had announced on broadcaster Saarländischer Rundfunk at the end of last week that the blackmail of the workers would continue. Workers in Saarlouis would have to prepare for "further tough negotiations on the future of the plant." The deadline was June 30. Details were subject to secrecy. The intention was to prevent anything leaking out and thus becoming a disadvantage for Saarlouis in the bidding process with Valencia, he said.

The offer submitted last Thursday was therefore only an "initial plan." The works council, plant management and management in Cologne would now continue to work on it and negotiate, he added. The newspaper *Die Welt* reports that the works council representatives from Saarland have "put together" a joint package with the works council in Cologne. It is unclear whether Ford workers in Cologne will also have to make concessions.

The initiative of Ford workers to unite in a rank-and-file committee independent of the works councils is therefore of

great significance in the current situation. As every worker knows very well, managers do not build cars. Without workers, everything stands still. But while the Ford group operates internationally, the unions and their works council representatives tie workers to their locations and countries. This is how they try to push through the attacks.

Ford workers can only defend their jobs, their wages and their working conditions if they unite internationally across national borders. The European plants are currently barely working to capacity. Last year, vehicle sales in the main European markets shrank to just 554,000 passenger cars, 44 percent fewer than in 2019, according to Jato Dynamics, writes *Die Welt*. "No other car brand has crashed so steeply in the pandemic." If the company's top management has its way, the employees will once again have to bleed for it.

The significance of the dispute at Ford has far-reaching implications. In Valencia, it affects not only the workforce of more than 6,000 in Almussafes, but also more than a hundred companies with 25,000 employees. In Saarland, about 4,800 Ford workers and about 1,500 workers in supplier companies are directly affected, and in the entire Saarland car supplier industry a total of 40,000 people indirectly.

Moreover, "employees of German car plants can see from this example what they will be threatened with on a broad front in the next few years," commented business weekly *Wirtschaftswoche* on Tuesday. Since many plants in Germany were technically and logically outdated, new plants were often built for the production of electric vehicles, as at VW. But these could be built anywhere. "A trend to produce in low-wage countries has long been visible." Eastern Europe was tempting, says *Wirtschaftswoche*. "Ford in Saarlouis would therefore not be the last German plant that no longer has a future."

This must not be allowed to happen. Ford in Saarlouis and Valencia must be the first plants where workers unite across national borders to defend their jobs and wages, independent of the trade unions and their works council representatives.

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Register here to participate anonymously in our meeting next Saturday (February 5) at 6 p.m. Central European Time. And sign up below to join us in building rank-and-file committees at all workplaces and companies.



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