

Ford Saarlouis works council chairman defends secret negotiations and threatens workers

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Monday's speech by works council chairman Markus Thal at the online factory meeting at Ford's plant in Saarlouis, Germany was a declaration of war on workers. There is no other way to understand his statement, addressed to the approximately 4,600-strong workforce, that the preservation of the plant would not come for free.

According to reports from workers present, Thal said he would not fight for the vested rights to the end, only to be forced to say that the plant would be closed in the next twelve months. He would not go along with that, he said. He stands for maintaining the plant, he said, but warned that if production were to continue at the Saarlouis plant after 2025, when manufacture of the Focus model will come to an end, then there would have to be sacrifices.

By announcing that he would not defend the vested rights, Thal has indicated that he is prepared to make very far-reaching concessions on wages, working hours and social benefits. But even then, a plant closure was quite possible, he added.

Since this cowardly submission to the dictates of management is being met with hostility by many workers, Thal has insisted on strict secrecy in the negotiations. At the factory meeting it became clear once again that he and his closest confidants on the negotiating committee are conducting a veritable conspiracy against the workforce.

In a letter to the workers in Saarlouis the previous week, the Ford Rank-and-File Committee had stressed that the workforce was "receiving no information on all of our burning questions: What attacks have been elaborated by management and the works council in the [internal] bidding war with [the Ford plant in] Valencia?" The works council leaders were hiding their agreements from workers "because they are in cahoots with management."

This assessment has been fully confirmed. Monday's factory meeting started half an hour later than planned because the European Works Council was still talking with Ford's top European management. While workers in

Saarlouis had to wait for almost three and a half hours until the end of the meeting, only to receive no information about the future of the plant, the Ford group had been presenting plans for the electrification of its models in Europe. Ford Europe boss Stuart Rowley subsequently announced that three electric passenger cars and four new electric commercial vehicle models would be built in Europe from 2024.

The Romanian plant in Craiova would produce an EV version of the Ford Puma SUV as well as medium and large electric vans. In Turkey, a joint venture between Ford Europe, Koc and SK ON Ltd. will be established to build one of the largest plants in Europe for the manufacture of batteries for commercial vehicles.

At its main plant in Cologne, Ford plans to invest two billion dollars to bring two EV models to market as early as 2024. Production is to be doubled from 600,000 to 1.2 million cars annually. In a television interview, Benjamin Gruschka, chair of the general works council and chair of the Cologne works council, expressed his delight and was already dreaming of the reintroduction of the night shift and a "full capacity utilisation" of the plant.

But neither the Valencia plant nor the one in Saarlouis featured in the presentation. Ford boss Rowley did not say a word about the ongoing internal bidding competition between the plants in Germany and Spain.

Allegedly, Gruschka, who also spoke to the workers in Saarlouis on Monday morning, only learned shortly before going online that all plants had received production commitments, except the two factories in Saarlouis and Valencia. In reality, the decision had already been made last Wednesday in the US, and a leaflet from the Cologne works council, signed by Gruschka, was published during the factory meeting.

In it, Gruschka insisted that workers in the Saarland plant learn nothing about the "Saarlouis project," as he calls it. He justified his silence by saying that secrecy had been imposed

so as not to endanger the project. Markus Thal also adopted this stance in his speech to the Monday meeting, asking workers to trust him, saying he was in Cologne at least two days a week and was negotiating with management.

The works council he heads has already agreed to job cuts in recent years. In 2018, the company had declared that the cuts would help ensure everything turned out well. That no longer seems to be the case. Now they would have to wait for the company's decision in June, he said. And even then, the plant that won the bid would not be out of the woods. Ford did not want to decide until the beginning of next year whether at least one of the two plants had a future. If both plants were to be dismantled, that would be "a massive disaster," said Thal.

Workers reported that as in previous meetings, Thal was very arrogant and brusque. He had posed the workforce with an ultimatum: "This is the situation, there is no other way," regardless of whether one liked it or not. He said he did not want to say anything about the content of the offer the works council and plant management had handed over to Ford's European headquarters in Cologne at the end of January, and which they were now apparently continuing to negotiate. End of story.

Nevertheless, Thal called on the workforce to vote for IG Metall union candidates in the current works council elections.

At the meeting, he was supported by management. Rainer Ludwig, managing director of human resources and social affairs and deputy chairman of the Ford-Werke GmbH management agreed that the initial situation was difficult. In the past, however, management and unions had cooperated successfully—meaning the downsizing over the past years. It was important to build on this, he said.

Finally, he also asked workers to exercise their democratic right to elect the works council.

Many workers were extremely upset by all this. "Once again, we've heard nothing," one worker complained. "Why should we vote for this IG Metall works council if it keeps quiet about what it is negotiating? What are we voting for then? You can't do that!"

In preparation for the factory meeting, the Ford Rank-and-File Committee's letter to the workforce had already pointed out last week: "Elections presuppose information. What is the point of works council elections if the works council excludes us from all information about the most important issues that concern us? IG Metall is asking us for a blank cheque in these works council elections. We are supposed to rubber stamp our own sell-out. No way!"

In the meeting, the works council representatives and management not only talked about the semiconductor crisis, the coronavirus pandemic and its effects, both Ludwig and

Thal also raised the issue of the Ukraine war.

Both repeated the propaganda of NATO, those in government and the media that Putin and Russia were solely responsible for the war and the danger of an unpredictable escalation. In unison, they claimed there was no alternative but to support the governments in the US, Germany, and NATO against Russia, for example by imposing sanctions.

Just as Thal bows to the government on the war issue, he is at the service of Ford. This bureaucrat is a loyal servant of government and the propertied classes. According to workers' reports of the meeting, he declared that Ford did not belong to the workers, Ford was not state property. Therefore, there was nothing to do but kowtow to management.

At the same time, in the works council election, Thal demanded a 100 percent voter turnout, as in the Stalinist former East Germany. He threatened workers that everything would be much worse if they did not vote for IG Metall. Management was looking very closely at how much support the works council has in the workforce, he said. The higher the voter turnout, the better the works council could present itself to the company, Thal claimed.

The opposite is the case. That is because the works council is not acting as an adversary to management but is in collusion with the Ford bosses.

Both management and the works council live in abject fear that the workforce will organise itself independently and organise a real struggle against the threatened plant closure, against job cuts and wage reductions.

This underscores the necessity of the call by the Ford Rank-and-File Committee for an independent fight by workers in both Germany and Spain to defend jobs. "Firstly, we deny the works council the right to continue to negotiate on our behalf and call on all colleagues to join our independent action committee to take the fight to defend wages and jobs into their own hands, together with colleagues in Spain and around the world. There is no way around it. We need to organise independently."

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